

...and they never lived happily ever after. The battle for justice goes on

Voices of married girls in Telangana

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Since 2012 MVFoundation's is actively engaged in work on adolescent children and in preventing child marriage. We have so far stopped nearly 20,000 child marriages. While our program on elimination of child labour focused on education of all children in a full time formal school as a non negotiable principle, our work on getting every adolescent child into the education system and stopping child marriages and had to address deeper maladies such gender discrimination and violence at homes, sexual exploitation and mental abuse in our society.

MVFoundation therefore initiated this study which aims to capture a running current in the story of child marriage and it is, I quote "to look at the intersection between state, laws and policies, gender discrimination and violence, sexual assault and child labour, control over the child through the institution of child marriage".

Through its anecdotal approach the study attempts to bring out aspects of child marriage, by highlighting subjugation as sanctified subjugation. It shows how the institution of child marriage devastates the child through multiple forms of violence and control over her body, sexuality and mind – and this subjugation is throughout her life. The normalization of violence is the saddest aspect of this silent subjugation. Her body, as this study suggests is everyone else's but her.

Child marriage as this study observes is not merely a social evil caused by tradition and culture. It is a form of exploitation and that is where the hope lies. There is no exploitation which cannot be eliminated.

A mature society, an informed public establishment of institutions like, Childline Child Welfare Committees to take care of the victims of child marriage; provisioning of free secondary school up to class 12 by the government with free text books, transportation and hostels; strengthening of the roles of each of the functionaries – teacher, police, local officials and the government at all levels; and the local bodies, community and parents as well as NGO is indispensable for stopping child marriage.

MVF has successfully worked with each one of these stakeholders and the girls as this study observes draw extraordinary courage to get out of this exploitation by engaging themselves with each of these institutions.

The study also examines the efficacy of some of the legal aspects of the various laws which provide protection.

We begin with our gratitude to the married girls who allowed a glimpse of their lives and shared their agonies with us. They started with trepidation, halting yes and no responses and huge silences as if they were in search of their voices. In three to four hours, they opened up a volcano of emotions and expressed their deepest and innermost thoughts, pain and anguish.

We also thank all those girls who bravely withstood the pressures and were successful in not getting married, for sharing their struggles for freedom.

Our thanks are due to the M V Foundation's female staff who were researchers for the study and gave the respondents time, space and a patient hearing. As they heard the girls' narrations, they felt one with them, finding echoes in their own struggle for survival with dignity. They strongly feel that there has to be an end to such violence and are determined to work towards eliminating child marriage

We thank all those who advised us during the course of research – Jandhyala Kameswari, David, Rekha Wazir, Linda van der Wijk and Sita Mamidipudi. They set very high standards for our research design and questions. We also include Bhaskar, Dhananjay, Venkatesh and Prakash who contributed to the conceptualisation of the findings of the survey. We thank Jayakar and Diwakar for their compilation of both the primary and secondary data and Amit for data analysis.

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We owe it to Shantha Sinha for conducting this study patiently from the beginning to end and guiding it to a logical conclusion. Her work is a source of inspiration for the entire staff and stakeholders of MVF.

We hope that this study offers fresh insights to enable us overcome the invasion and conquest of girls through the practice of child marriage

M.R.Vikram

Secretary Trustee, M V Foundation

Foreword

MVF has worked for more than two decades in the area of protection of child rights with special attention to abolition of child labour through universalisation of education and to prevention of child marriages. MVF's non negotiable principles, methodology of involving all stake holders and working in collaboration with the community has been widely noticed and appreciated nationally and internationally. Many NGO's in India and abroad and state governments in India have adopted the MVF model to deal with children's problems. MVF feels its perspective has informed policy to a large extent.

It is now venturing into an entirely new area and new age group namely adolescent girls especially from the poor classes. It is a virtual minefield full of social inhibitions and discriminations and medieval mindsets. This makes it a more difficult task than child rights. To get a feel for the type of problems and challenges faced by the girls a preliminary survey was conducted earlier and the results and analysis have been reported. To get a more precise idea of what each individual girl faces – no two girls stories are the same - a survey was conducted by interviewing a number of girls of different categories in detail and get specific details of their problems and challenges. The girls include married and unmarried, these who fought for their right to continue education, others who fought and failed, some who never even tried but meekly surrendered and so on.

The amazing part of this survey is the skill, patience, perseverance and persuasive powers shown by the volunteers in gaining the confidence of the girls and making them speak candidly and truly about their experience. The results of this study are incorporated in this report.

This study will enable MVF to formulate a concrete programme to deal with the families, community and the state to mitigate the problems of the girls and make them more productive and constructive citizens.

Dr.M.Krishnamurthi
Chairman and Managing Trustee
M V Foundation

Preface

"Nobody should have a life like mine..."

"With the force of social approval, blessings of God and legislative acceptance, the subjugation of the girl assumes sanctity. This is not marriage but sanctified subjugation". Thus opens a remarkable and searing study of child marriage in 21st century India, conducted by the Telangana based M V Foundation. Human rights and child rights advocates, but more broadly citizens of India, South Asia and the all too numerous countries where child marriage persists as an endemic sore, owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the meticulous and highly skilled researchers who have given us this detailed study of one of the most egregious child rights violations of our age. Carefully investigating the multifaceted oppression of 72 adolescent girls, two thirds of them married, the researchers present an unprecedented, detailed and rigorous picture of the life of girls robbed of their childhood and subjected to abuse, humiliation and exploitation in the name of family values and tradition.

The M V Foundation is rightly renowned in India for its trend-setting work on the prevention of child labour and its replacement by a non- negotiable right to education, irrespective of age, caste, disability or gender, for every child. As remarkable, however, is the Foundation's work on another embedded child rights violation - the pervasive though illegal practice of child marriage. It has, over the years, prevented 25,000 such marriages from taking place, a huge achievement even if just a minuscule fraction of the 14.3 million children - 11.6 percent of the Indian population - still subjected to the practice.

With this study, we learn that a staggering 89% of girls interviewed were physically assaulted by their husbands on a daily basis, that 73% of husbands drank every day and 91% came home late often after spending time with friends, while 85% of the girls never had any opportunity to visit or spend time with their own friends. Of course these grave social harms have serious health repercussions - only 39% of deliveries resulted in healthy outcomes for both mother and child, yet 67% of girls in the study said they could not talk about their health concerns with their husbands. Predictably large numbers of the girls did not feel well - with 15% reporting depression and 37% saying they experienced loneliness. The picture thus drawn is one of social suffering and oppression on a staggering scale, and of complicity and callous indifference from humble villagers to powerful power brokers at the highest levels.

As the authors rightly note, much scholarly work has been done on child marriage and numerous recommendations to abolish it have been proposed over decades. What this study adds, however, is a rich tapestry of human emotions, conveyed through the lively and deeply affecting words of the children themselves - words that are captured by researchers who have taken the trouble to establish trust, to listen and to faithfully reproduce what they have learnt. This is not only unusual but invaluable. For it is the girls' words that ring in one's mind and bear testimony to the magnitude of endemic and privatized oppression that so urgently needs its #me too moment.

We also learn of vigorous and challenging interventions that succeed in preventing some child marriages from proceeding, and of the dramatic change in girls' life fortunes that this may give rise to - an opportunity for higher education, for example, rather than a life of servitude and abuse. As the report notes, Vikarabad District has developed effective protocols to stop child marriage, precedents that could and should be emulated broadly.

This report is searing and hard hitting, a bearing of witness and an urgent call for action at the same time. Again and again we read, in the voice of the interviewees: "My life is full of troubles... My only wish is that nobody should have a life like mine". But millions do. I hope this remarkable report has the impact it deserves to have - strengthening the hand of girls and young women to secure access to justice, equality and non-discrimination that they continue to be cheated of, and bolstering the work of officials and civil society actors working alongside them to abolish child marriage in our midst.

Jacqueline Bhabha

FXB Center for Health and Human Rights

Harvard University

Executive Summary

Introduction

Even as we are in the 21st century, the barbaric practice of child marriage continues. A staggering 14.3 million children, constituting 11.6 percent of population in the 15-19 years age group, are victims of child marriage in India (Census, 2011).¹The state of Telangana where the study was carried out —is no better than the national average — with 11.3 percent of population or 0.4 million married persons in the age group of 15-19 years 19.4 percent of married children in the 15-19 years age group in India are girls and 4.7 percent are boys (Census 2011).

19.6 percent of married children in the 15-19 years age group in Telangana are girls and 3.4 percent are boys (Census 2011). Mahbubnagar District in the state of Telangana has the largest percentage of married girls in the 15-19 years age group at 26.2 percent and Karimnagar District has the least incidence of married girls at 14.2 percent. The districts of Ranga Reddy (21.1%), Nalgonda (21.5%), Khammam and Medak (21% each) are above the Telangana State average in terms of married girls while Warangal (18%), Adilabad (17.8%), and Nizamabad (16.3%) are less than the State average..

About the Study

M V Foundation² conducted a study on the predicament of girls who had been married for two-three years in the districts of Nalgonda, Ranga Reddy, Mahbubnagar and Hyderabad in Telangana state. The study was based on detailed interviews with 46 married girls and 26 girls whose marriages were stopped and who are now pursuing education. All the children are currently 16-20 years old.

The interviews attempted to capture the girls' experiences in the marital family — domestic and wage working conditions, relationship with the husband and in-laws, sexual, physical and mental violence and aspects of gender discrimination. These interactions included sharing of their experiences on health, pregnancy and child birth, anxieties, friendship and leisure, the risks they endure and the independence and autonomy that has been sacrificed in being married at an early age and access to institutions, programmes and support structures.

¹19.4 percent of married children in the 15-19 years age group in India are girls and 4.7 percent are boys (Census 2011).

² M V Foundation (MVF) is a registered trust based in Hyderabad. It has worked for abolition of child labour and helped mainstream children into fulltime formal schools until they complete Class X. Its current focus is on adolescent children especially girls.

In the process, the study analysed the laws and policies in relation to children — especially adolescents — to understand how they affect the lives of children who are married.

Qualitative Findings of the Study

Almost every girl had been devastated through multiple forms of violence and control. She lives in a daily war zone, in a battle between un-equals, where there is no doubt about who the vanquished and conquered are.

The girl is caught in an endless cycle of insults and humiliation; enveloped with loneliness and hostility at every step; subject to brutal violence and control that fills her with fear and anxiety. She feels hopelessness and resignation to fate, which pushes her into depression and to the edge of sanity. These stories are of tragic unfreedom that have killed souls, and wasted the bodies and minds of umpteen girls. Resistance is invariably met with punitive response. It is only in rare and desperate occasions that a girl seeks refuge with her parents, who also consider her as a burden. She is unable to cope with the stigma and becomes isolated and lonely.

She gives up aspirations or hopes of realizing her potential. Her voice and anguish are not heard. Such physical, mental and sexual violence against the girl has social approval as it is integral to the institution of child marriage. This violence is inviolable and irrevocable since the marriage is bound by rituals, religious invocations and blessings of God. Since the legislative framework too does not make child marriage totally voidable, there is a legal sanction to violence. With the force of social approval, blessings of religion and legislative acceptance, the subjugation of the girl assumes sanctity. Therefore, this is not marriage but sanctified subjugation.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2016 (PCMA) and its limitations

The law supposed to protect girls from child marriage is the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA). The PCMA has serious flaws as it does not make child marriage totally voidable. Once the marriage is not prevented or stopped, it can be consummated by law, unless the minor girl exercises agency and seeks annulment of marriage.

The PCMA is based on the assumption that marriage has its own sanctity and is bound by tradition and culture that have to be respected. It assumes no difference between a girl child and an adult woman and fails to respect their specific constitutional rights. Therefore, sanctity of marriage is a norm for both children and adult women. It expects the girl to seek

annulment when it is well known that even adult women do not have the capacity to withstand the pressures of breaking a marriage and seeking divorce.

After the marriage is annulled, the children born out of marriage are given legal status under the PCMA. The PCMA assumes that only the marital family has the sole responsibility for her maintenance and the children born to her. Thus under the PCMA, the state takes no responsibility for maintenance, rehabilitation and restoration of her rights as a child. There is no mention of her entitlements in law. This amounts to an absolute denial of her right to education, nutrition and health and a life with dignity. Even the children born out of marriage are not guaranteed state protection.

Although there are relevant laws such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act), the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 (JJ Act), Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 2016 — these laws fail to consider the complex situations of underage married girls. They receive no state support in claiming entitlements that are their legal rights. There is an assumption that once married, the girl is not a child anymore and no longer needs her rights to education, health, protection and a life with dignity. Throughout, the state ignores that the girl is a child and the very logic of child marriage drives her into a black hole of violence, abuse and total subjugation.

State complicity —primarily responsible for child marriage

The State has an obligation by law to protect girls - whether in preventing her from being pushed out of school, providing support to stop child marriage, providing her with healthcare, food and nutritional security, saving her from gender discrimination, violence and sexual abuse. In not reaching out to her, the state denies girls of their entitlements which are guaranteed by the Constitution of India through laws and policies. It is due to complicity by the state that children are forced into marriage.

Action to be taken

It is imperative to treat the institution of marriage as a farce as far children are concerned. The law on child marriage has to be rescinded. The practice of sanctified subjugation of the child should be recognized and stopped by law. Every other relevant law that deals with children and adolescents has to be amended to include a provision to protect them from such sanctified subjugation and ensure they are not forced into it.

Quantitative Findings

1. Profile of parents of children who got married

- All families lived below poverty line with 79 per cent earning Rs.50,000 per annum, 16 per cent had earnings between Rs.51,000 and Rs.75,000 per annum and 5 per cent earned between Rs.76,000 and Rs. 100,000 annually.
- The education levels of both parents were very low. 91 per cent of mothers were illiterates with 6 per cent having studied up to Class V and 3 per cent up to Class VIII.
- The education level of fathers was also low with 62 per cent being illiterate, 24 per cent having studied up to Class V, 3 per cent up to Class VIII and 11 per cent up to Class X.

2. Profile of children who were married.

Age, Education and Marriage

- More school dropouts were married as compared to those attending schools.
- The critical age group when most school going children got married was between 13-15 years and the critical classes were Classes VIII-X.
- The most vulnerable children among school dropouts, whose marriages were fixed, were in the 16-17 years age group and none of them had studied beyond Class VII.
- That they got married when they were 16 or 17 years old, shows that they were contributing to the family income.
- Of the married girls, 83 per cent were living with the spouse, 11 per cent were living separately, 4 per cent were divorced and 2 per cent were widowed.

3. About marriage

- 70 per cent of girls knew that there is a law prohibiting child marriage for girls below 18 years and boys below 21 years.
- 40 per cent of men who got married were below 21 years of age. They too were victims of child marriage.
- 67 per cent of children stated that did not want to get married. 65 per cent felt nervous and afraid. The girls who resisted their marriage did so by not eating, not participating in any work in the house, not talking to anybody in the family, arguing with parents and even threatening to commit suicide.
- Most girls knew there was a law against child marriage and resisted getting married, but ultimately failed in stopping their marriage.

4. Work and wages of the girl before and after marriage

- 59 per cent of girls stated that they did wage work before marriage and 41 per cent stated that they did wage work after marriage.
- Children who were out of school did more wage work before marriage than after marriage. Since they bore children they had greater responsibility on the home front. Therefore, their wage earning work decreased.
- They did not keep the wages earned, but gave them away either to the mother-in-law or husband.

5. Relationship with husband

- 76 per cent of girls stated that they do not have any support from their husbands
- 70 per cent of girls did not discuss their problems with their husband
- 80 per cent of girls could not talk about issues relating to work with their husband.
- 86 per cent of girls stated that the husband never enquired whether she had eaten at all.
- 68 per cent could not ask their husbands to buy things from the market.

On illness and health

- 67 per cent of girls could not talk about health issues with their husband.
- Of the 33 per cent of girls who could discuss their health with their husband, 71 per cent said that the husbands accompanied them to the doctor.
- 90 per cent of girls had no help during their illness.
- 73 per cent of girls stated that their husbands drank on a daily basis. 27 per cent of girls said that the husband drank rarely.

On social life

- 91 per cent of the girls said that the husband came home late as he spent time with friends.
- 87 per cent of girls mentioned that they visit their parents along with the husband.
- 85 per cent never visited their friends.
- Only 13 per cent visited friends of their husbands.
- 41 per cent went for movies with their husbands.
- 47 per cent went to the market with their husbands.

Violence and assault

- 89 per cent of girls were physically assaulted by the husband and scolded on a daily basis.
- 65 per cent of the girls felt it was okay for the husband to beat them in anger.

- 71 per cent faced physical violence after marriage from the in-laws
- 80 per cent had never faced any physical violence before marriage.

6. Pregnancy and delivery

- 78 per cent had contacted an ASHA worker, 92 per cent had antenatal checkups and all took tetanus vaccinations.
- 15 per cent of pregnancies were miscarriages and 32 per cent of deliveries were performed through caesarean. 4 per cent of the children were stillborn, 4 per cent had neonatal mortality and 6 per cent were unwell. Broadly, both mother and child were safe in only 39 per cent of the cases.

7. Condition of health

- 78 per cent of girls stated that their health had deteriorated and 30 per cent complained of body aches and pains after marriage.
- 15 per cent were mentally depressed and 37 per cent felt lonely. Nobody stated that they were healthy after marriage.

Conclusion

All these girls are asking for is to be able to go to school, study, play, eat, and to be taken care of in illness and health. She does not want to be controlled and treated as a burden to be disposed off. If only this minimum is achieved, it will hopefully lead to her dignity and enable a transformation in her life against all forms of violence, discrimination and patriarchal values. This is all that the girl is battling for.

A sense of urgency is required to stop subjugation of the girls and bring about transformation. State complicity in perpetuation of violence on girls should be replaced by the obligation of the state to secure girls and provide them with a life of equal opportunities. Confronting gender discrimination and assertion of equality is to be seen as a process of resolving power relations.

Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, (PCMA), marriage is to be regarded as *void ab initio*. A legal framework from the perspective of the girl must materialize. Only then can solutions for providing justice to the girls emerge.

Respecting girls and their freedom is a political issue and an ethical compulsion, requiring wholehearted commitment from the state and a moral renaissance. It is a political act bound by 'niyat' and moral imperatives.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The study is about married girls who are poor and belong to vulnerable communities such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Backward Classes (BCs) and minorities. Most belong to rural areas while some are from the urban slums.

It is commonly known that girl children experience discrimination at every stage of their lives. Such discrimination is particularly aggravated after marriage. In many homes, the girl child works all the time without leisure, sometimes has little to eat, is exposed to violence and abuse and has nothing to hope for. Such discrimination operates at all levels –whether at the level of family, society, values and attitudes, or policy and legal framework, structure of economy and power relations.

The ideological content of patriarchy perpetuates gender discrimination at the level of the family and society and permeates the ecology of the girls' daily existence. Further, state policies and programmes for the rights of girls are woefully inadequate and superficial, reinforcing discrimination. This toxic combination of ideology and state complicity results in untold violence and non-realisation of selfhood and dignity.

The barbaric practice of child marriage continues in the 21st century, taking on new forms and rationales. Hence, 14.3 million children — constituting 11.6 percent of population in the age group of 15-19 years — are victims of child marriage in India. 19.4 percent of children in 15-19 years category are married girls and 4.7 per cent are boys (Census 2011).

The state of Telangana where the current study has been carried out is no better than the national average, with 11.3 percent of population or 0.4 million married persons in the age group of 15-19 years. 19.6 percent of children in the 15-19 years age group in Telangana are married girls and 3.4 percent are married boys. Mahbubnagar district in the state of Telangana has the largest percentage of married girls in the 15-19 years age group at 26.2 percent while Karimnagar district has the lowest numbers of married girls at 14.2 percent. The districts of Ranga Reddy (21.1%), Nalgonda (21.5%) and Khammam and Medak (21% each) are above the Telangana state average in terms of numbers of married girls while Warangal (18%), Adilabad (17.8%), and Nizamabad (16.3%) are less than the state average. (Census 2011)

It is well-documented that when girls marry at an early age, they have less opportunity to mature, physically and psychologically. They have not been prepared to deal with the challenges of married life and face heightened risk of marital breakdown and husbands engaging in polygamous relationships. Such girls experience violence, sexual exploitation or domestic servitude imposed by husbands and in-laws. They are unable to defend themselves against physical and mental abuse that can transpire at the marital home.

Research also suggests that child marriages have a significant impact on reproductive healthcare, nutrition, infant care and safe sex. Girls who are married before the age of 15 have on average two live births more than women married after the age of eighteen which is the legal age of marriage for girls.³ They give birth to underweight babies, have repeated abortions and miscarriages, endure pregnancy and delivery complications and carry greater risks of maternal mortality. Child marriage affects a girl's health due to sexual and other forms of abuse and early pregnancy (Desai and Andrist, 2010). There is a broad consensus among academicians and scholars at global, national and local levels on the ill effects of child marriage.

Some studies that have looked at the causes of child marriage, have established a strong correlation between poverty and child marriage and also with occupational patterns and vulnerability. Others have shown that child marriage is strongly linked with caste factors and not necessarily poverty. This is particularly due to endogamous relationships and the cultural practice of arranged marriages where the pressure of kith and kin to settle marriages is enormous (Jishnu Das et al., 2005).

Research has also shown the link between education of the parents and the child, in delaying the age of marriage. Education of parents, especially the mother, is a factor in delaying the daughter's age of marriage. (Schultz, T. P Srinivasan, K Anderton, D. L. *et.al*, Axinn, W. G., and Thornton, A). Analyses on adolescent children's access to education suggest that 'girls with secondary school education or higher are much less likely to marry early than those with primary education or less.'⁴Being in school enables a girl to resist her marriage more effectively compared to a girl who is out of school. Even family members who oppose early marriage are able to do so when a child is in school,

³ The legal age of marriage for boys is 21 years.

⁴Reducing Child Marriage in India: A model to scale up results New Delhi 2016 <http://cbps.in/wp-content/uploads/Child-Marriage-UNICEF.pdf>

since they can argue that the child's future cannot be put to stake. On the other hand, a child not attending school would find it difficult to resist early marriage or justify postponement of marriage and is pushed to being resigned to her fate. Being out of school also invisibilises her. To elaborate, a child going to school can offer resistance to marriage, whereas the out of school child is forced to accept the decision as she cannot provide convincing reasons for not marrying. She has no peer group to support her, no institution like the school and its teachers who could argue on her behalf and so she is invisible and succumbs easily.

At what stage, can education act as a deterrent? Is it at the primary, elementary or high school level? 'If a girl manages to complete middle school, there is a strong possibility that she will stay on to complete her entire schooling and study beyond and effectively postpone marriage until or after the age of 18 years. Primary schooling, on the other hand, does not seem to have a similar marriage postponement effect. In this respect, its impact on the female age of marriage is likely to be no different from illiteracy or less than one year of schooling.⁵An adolescent girl is most at risk of early marriage during the middle school years. The positive effect of schooling on the age of marriage in India is well established.⁶

Child marriages are a consequence of tradition and culture that reinforces gender discrimination and patriarchy. (Srinivas Goli, 2016). Indeed, cultural practices override educational and economic considerations. Studies have also shown how fears of safety, perceptions of female modesty and chastity and worries of tarnishing family honour compel parents to marry off daughters at a very early age. Other related apprehensions include fears of a 'love' marriage or girls engaging in premarital sex, which could lead to pregnancy and loss of family respectability (Verma and Srinivasan, 2014).In fact 'to avoid any complication marrying off their daughter, as soon as she attains puberty, is seen as a non-negotiable obligation' (Srinivasan, *et al* 2015).

At the same time, caste rather than education can be a strong influence on child marriage. Thus, women belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and SCs tend to have the lowest mean age at the time of marriage, irrespective of their level of education, locality and economic background (Jha, Jyothsna et al 2016). The weak enforcement of

⁵ Srinivasan, Padmavathi; Khan, Nizamuddin; Verma, Ravi; Giusti, Dora; Theis, Joachim & Chakraborty, Supriti. (2015). *District-level study on child marriage in India: What do we know about the prevalence, trends and patterns?* ICRW AND UNICEF

⁶ Desai, S., and Andrist, L., 'Gender Scripts and Age at Marriage in India', *Demography*, vol. 47, no.3, 2010, pp. 667-687

Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) is also a cause for continuing child marriages (Srinivas Goli 2016).

Factors cited and analysed in literature as causes of child marriage include poverty, safety of an unmarried girl, patriarchy and gender discrimination, tradition and culture, pressures from neighbourhood, relatives, grandparents and community, lack of education and illiteracy of parents, girls dropping out of school before completion of middle school, caste beliefs and weak enforcement of child marriage laws. Almost every study on child marriage has concluded that it is a threat to girls and there is consensus about its ill effects.

Purpose of Study and Methodology

The effects of child marriage have been adequately researched by scholars, academics and reputed institutions. The last word appears to have been said. Solutions have been recommended to end child marriage, yet the practice continues with impunity. Shock and outrage has faded. However, the plight of such girls has to be narrated a hundred times, a thousand times and reiterated, till their voices are finally heard. These are girls, barely out of their teens, and have been robbed of the natural processes and dramatic changes that accompany adolescence. Thus this Report. It is based on narrations that are repetitive and written without brevity on the plight of the girls to be dinned into the public consciousness and with hope that the State acts with a sense of urgency.

The purpose of the current study is to look at the intersection between state laws and policies, gender discrimination and violence, sexual assault and child labour and control over the child through the institution of child marriage. While existing literature on child marriage has covered these aspects these aspects, this study attempts to weave together the themes to understand how they play on girls' lives and agency.

The study is based on in depth interviews with 46 children from the districts of Nalgonda, Ranga Reddy, Mahbubnagar and Hyderabad who have been married for three-four years and are now 16-20 years old. Detailed unstructured interviews were held with each girl, lasting 4-5 hours with breaks for the girl to cook, feed children, eat and recover from the search for selfhood. Consent was sought since sensitive questions were asked. All girls provided their consent for interviews, including the recording of their names for the study. Most interviews were privately held with each girl.

Family members were informed that the purpose of the interviews was to find out the girls' experience with the system and its functionaries. This has been mentioned because the girl would be questioned by curious family members and relatives and she would need to give a valid answer on what the entire discussion was about. . The girls were also convinced that they should mention this as the purpose of interview. Care was taken that there was no suspicion. When it was found that the girl may be at risk from the family members for a private conversation with the girl such interviews were not conducted.

The interviews attempted to capture the girls' experiences of work in the marital family —domestic and wage working conditions, relationship with the husband and in-laws, sexual, physical and mental violence and aspects of gender discrimination. These interactions included sharing of their experiences on health, pregnancy and child birth, anxieties, friendship and leisure, the risks they endure and the independence and autonomy that has been sacrificed in being married at an early age and also access to institutions, programmes and support structures.

The study sought to find answers to whether the girls could raise their voice against violence and abuse. If so, whether their voices were heard at all? What more could she have done? Where would she go? Who is there for her? Whom did she ask for help? Could they support her at all? What gave the authority and confidence to the elders to force a marriage against law, in full knowledge that the girls' life is finished forever? This was followed up with collecting quantitative information about the girl, basic data on the family, age of marriage, work, education and health. Most girls were relieved at having a listener and felt comforted after the interview. Where girls needed urgent medical attention, their families were counselled and urged to provide treatment. Such cases were also followed up later.

The study also conducted in-depth interviews with 26 children whose marriages were stopped and who are currently pursuing education to understand the variation with married girls. What are the differences with respect to work, discrimination, violence, relationship with parents, relatives, neighbourhood, education, health, psycho-social conditions; and their own responses to their condition and access to institutions and support structures (if any).

The views of anganwadi workers and other functionaries were collected through one on one interviews with them, on their respective roles with regard to protection of the girl and her well-being, stopping her from getting married and rescuing her from all forms

of violence. The interviewees were asked if laws on child marriage, child labour and policies on education and child protection predetermined the inaction of the functionaries and about limitations of the system. This was linked with critical gaps in the institutional framework and experiences of girls in accessing the system. Focus group discussions were held with activists involved in the stoppage of child marriage.

Chapter 2

Child Marriage - or sanctified subjugation?

This section focuses on the lives of girls —two-three years after marriage —with regard to conditions of work and exploitation, sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth, vulnerabilities, endeavours to get out of violence and in seeking justice and support from family. The framework in this narration disputes the understanding of the girl as merely a 'victim' of child marriage. Instead, it perceives the entire victimhood to be of sanctified subjugation. The conquest and subjugation of the girl and her battle for survival goes unnoticed. This chapter deals with precisely how violence and total surrender is legitimized and accepted through social approval, weak laws and rituals and practices. This entire process, which sanctifies child marriage, gives legitimacy to the violence inflicted on the girl child.

This section looks at the various forms of subjugation of married girls and extent of normalisation of violence in their daily lives.

1. Profile of children

75 children whose marriages were fixed 2-3 years ago were identified from the districts of Ranga Reddy, Mahbubnagar and Nalgonda. Of these, 50 consented to be interviewed and finally, 46 children could allocate time for interviews. The four other children migrated and could not be traced. 43 per cent of children belonged to the Backward Classes (BC), 36 per cent to Scheduled Castes (SCs), and 15 per cent were members of the Scheduled Tribes (STs).

54 per cent of children were married when they were 13-15 years of age. This was followed by 27 per cent were married when they were 16-17 years of age group, 4 per cent when they were about 12 years old and another 4 per cent were married when they were 18 years old.

46 per cent of children were studying in school when their marriages were fixed. 18 per cent of the children said that they were in Class VII, 25 per cent said they were in Classes VIII-X, while 8 per cent stated that they were in senior secondary school when they got married. Only one girl was pursuing graduation when her marriage was fixed.

Cases of child marriage were higher in the case of school dropouts. Since they could not argue about wanting to continue education, their resistance was weaker. Thus,

there were 54 per cent school dropouts whose marriages could not be stopped. 48 per cent were in the age group of 13-15 years and 52 per cent were in the age group of 16-17 years. 84 per cent of school dropouts had studied until Class VII and 16 per cent had never attended school. That they got married when they were 16-17 years old, shows that they were contributing to the family income.

School going children and school dropouts in the age group of 13 -15 years were the most vulnerable to child marriage.

2. Profile of parents

64% of children in the study stated that both their parents were alive and 2% said that both their parents were dead. 24% had only mothers alive whereas 10% had only fathers alive. All families lived below poverty line with 79% earning Rs.50000 p.a., 16% earning between Rs.51000 and Rs.75000 p.a. and 5% between Rs.76000 and 1lakh p.a.

33 per cent of the fathers' occupation was farming, while 57 per cent were casual labourers and 9 per cent were unable to work. The mothers were multi-taskers engaged in more than one occupation. They doubled up as self-employed workers (42 per cent) and homemakers, did casual work (48 per cent) and also worked as domestic help (8 per cent) — all simultaneously. There was no case of a mother not being able to work.

The education levels of both parents were low. 91 per cent of mothers were illiterate, with 6 per cent who had studied up to Class V and 3 per cent until Class VIII. The education level of fathers was also low with 62 per cent being illiterate, with 24 per cent who had studied up to Class V, 3 per cent up to Class VIII and 11 per cent up to Class X.

When looking at the plight of married girls, the context of absolute poverty of their families, precarious livelihoods and illiteracy of parents must be kept in mind.

3. Decision of marriage and resistance

Located in an ecology of total deprivation, children as young as 13-15 years battled to continue in school before they succumbed to the pressures of getting married. Resisting girls did not eat, participate in the housework, or talk to anybody in the family, argued with parents and even threatened suicide. Due to such resistance, 15 per cent of marriages were postponed for a short period of one to six months.

70 per cent of the girls knew there is a law that prohibits child marriage for girls below 18 years and boys below 21 years. Only 28 per cent knew that the man they were

marrying was above 21 years of age. 40 per cent of the males getting married were below 21 years of age.

Most girls knew that they would be married once they reached the age of 13. They dreaded this and did not look forward to it. 67 per cent of children interviewed in this study said they did not want to get married. 65 per cent felt nervous and afraid. 28 per cent had the courage to argue against their marriage and 24 per cent mustered the courage to say that they wanted to study further. About 15 per cent were happy that their marriage was fixed.

None of the girls received support when they resisted. Both father and mother spoke about how family honor would be affected since they had committed to the daughter's marriage. They even asked her to leave the house if she disobeyed and also threatened to commit suicide. There was no support from siblings and relatives either.

44 per cent of the girls told their mothers that they did not want to get married and wanted to study further, as opposed to 20 per cent who told their fathers. The mothers' response was diverse. 46 per cent of the girls said their mothers would not yield because of family honour, because a commitment had already been made to the boy's family and because caste elders would not accept the refusal to marriage. 25 per cent of fathers had similar responses. Both parents also said that the reputation of the girl would be at stake if the marriage was stopped. 18 per cent of mothers' responses and 40 per cent of fathers' responses were in the nature of threats where the girls were asked to walk out of the house or that the parent would commit suicide. 25 per cent of mothers showed sympathy but said they were helpless and would not go against the father's wishes. These mothers and 15 per cent of fathers tried to convince the girl about family honour and that it was a good match.

37 per cent of children who did not want to get married asked their siblings for support. In 70 per cent cases, siblings convinced them to go ahead with the marriage and save family prestige, 16 per cent disagreed totally with them and even threatened them while 12 per cent said they understood but were helpless.

When the girl approached relatives for support, 47 per cent tried to convince her to marry for family prestige, 46 per cent disagreed and threatened her, and 7 per cent were supportive but said they were helpless.

After marriage, almost every girl was devastated by multiple forms of violence and control over her body, sexuality and mind. It is akin to living in a war zone day in and out, in a battle between un-equals, where there is no doubt about who the losers are. After two-three years of married life, 83 per cent were living with the spouse, 11 per cent were living separately, 4 per cent were divorced and 2 per cent were widowed.

4. Relationships in marital family and with the husband

Little anticipating her new role and responsibility as a wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and an entrant in to the community, the child bride begins married life with a pledge to remain bonded to the husband and his family, extended family and a neighbourhood of inquisitive strangers. The first week of marriage is full of rituals, exchange of gifts and visits by relatives and friends to see the newly married couple, especially the daughter-in-law. This is the only time in her married life that the girl feels important and welcomed. By the end of the week, she confronts relations of power and domination with different family members who want to control her.

Within a month of marriage, girls plunge into fetching water, sweeping, washing clothes and utensils, cooking and rushing to the fields, walking long distances for wage work or tending to sheep and cattle. They reach home at dusk to continue the next day with aches and pains that get aggravated overtime. Some of the girls who went to school and lived a relatively sheltered life before marriage, found it difficult to perform domestic chores with efficiency and were punished by in-laws or the husband. This violence of work with its deadly monotony leaves the girls with little respite or space for leisure, far less thinking or hoping for a change for the better.

Induction into work

'I got married when I was just 12 years old, even before I had my period. I was sent to live with my in-laws and ever since, I have no peace. I was forced to do all the domestic chores and care for the three sons of my husband's brother who live with us. At my mother's house, I never did much work as I was studying and went to school. I would occasionally help her in washing utensils and sweeping the floor. There was certainly no wage work. After marriage, I had to go to the field to earn wages and work on farms. I also had to cook for the entire house, and as time passed, the burden of work increased and I was expected to do everything, without rest. I had to take care of all the children in the house, feed and clothe them, and also take care of my own baby. My mother-in-law was impatient with me because I was so slow'. (*Renuka, 16 dropped out of school in Class VII. One daughter born through c section*).

A girl's security in a family ultimately depends on the relationship with her husband. Once the husband's domination over her gets pronounced, other family members follow suit. Frequently, the wrath of the husband knows no bounds. He is intolerant, finds faults with his wife, beats her up for not cooking or keeping home imperfectly, or if she dares to defend herself. There is no dialogue. There is no space to discuss problems with her husband regarding work or their financial situation. The husbands never enquire if the wife has eaten or about her health. There is hardly any social life, except accompanying the wife to her mother's house. Also, the husband can do no wrong.

Pressure of the husband and mother-in-law and patriarchy at its worst

My mother-in-law never tolerated my taking even a minute's rest. 'This is not the first time that a woman has become pregnant. When I was young, I worked twice as hard. I never complained', she said, even before I expressed that I was too tired, especially because I was carrying. I quarreled with my husband, asking if he cared at all. He scolded me and said, 'How can you not work? Don't you know that one day of rest is a loss of Rs. 200-300 as wages?' I worked and worked till the time I was full term. On seeing me becoming weak, I was sent home to my mother's. I delivered a baby boy, but was too weak to return to my in-laws house immediately. Now, I have returned and work on cotton seed and chilli farms. I migrate for seasonal work carrying my son everywhere. My husband takes no interest in me or my son. He grabs all the wages I earn. He goes out with his friends and only infrequently takes me to my mother's place which is 50 kms away.'

Rajamma, 18 studied up to Class III. One son

While interviewing the girls about the relationship with their husbands, the following came to light:

- 76 per cent of the girls said that their husbands did not support them at all. 70 per cent stated that they could not discuss their problems with their husbands. 80 per cent could not discuss their work and 66 per cent could not discuss the financial situation.
- 86 per cent said that their husbands did not enquire whether they had eaten.
- 63 per cent said that they could not discuss their health issues with the husband.
- 91 per cent said their husbands came home late since he spent time with friends.
- 55 per cent said the husbands drank daily and were alcoholics. Only 27 per cent said that the husband drank rarely.

- 89 per cent said they were scolded and even physically assaulted by the husband.
- 65 per cent stated that it was okay for the husband to beat them in anger. 80 per cent stated that they faced physical assault after marriage while 20 per cent were physically attacked by their parents, especially the father, before marriage.
- 85 per cent stated that their husbands did not visit her friends, 87 per cent stated that they never visited his friends. 87 visited their parents along with the husband. 41 per cent went for movies together and 47 per cent went to the market with the husband.

The mother-in-law who has herself lived a life of subjugation and been a victim of gender discrimination from her childhood and through marriage, passes on the logic of powerlessness of women to the next generation. She gives little thought to being kind and sympathetic and repeats the cycle of violence over the girl child. Her attitudes reinforce values of gender inequality and male domination. She thus becomes the face of patriarchal values and ethics.

5. Work, wages and subjugation

Girls have no space to bargain. Even the wages they earn are not theirs. If they live with in-laws, the wages go to the head of the family. If she and her husband live apart from the in-laws, he takes away the entire wage. The girls have no say in how their earnings are spent and are hesitant to ask for anything. They dare not ask the husband to get clothes, food, or take the children out. With the passage of time, the friction in the family becomes irreconcilable that they are weakened and subjugated in every aspect.

The girls are taunted if found sitting, doing nothing or taking rest. There have been occasions when girls are beaten up for talking to neighbours and been confined to loneliness and total isolation. There is always suspicion that the girl would speak about the family regarding her experiences of violence and discrimination at home. In fact, the only time she gets to talk and share her agonies, is with peers, while working on the field or when fetching water. Thus, while work is tiring and painful, it enables her maintain human contact. The girl is exploited till she becomes anaemic, loses weight, and is totally exhausted. She is enslaved, tortured, and the last breath of energy she holds is squeezed out of her.

With regard to their work lives, the following details came to light:

- 59 per cent were involved in wage work before marriage while 52 per cent got into wage work only after marriage.
- 3 per cent stated that they kept the wages with themselves before marriage whereas 97 per cent gave their wages to the parents
- 46 per cent gave their wages to the mother-in-law while 54 per cent gave the wages to the husband. None kept the wages for themselves.
- 63 per cent could refuse to work before marriage and 20 per cent could refuse after marriage.

Participation in Wage Work		
	Before marriage %	After marriage%
Yes	59	52
No	41	48

Refusal to work		
	Before marriage %	After marriage%
Yes	63	20
No	37	80

Experience of Physical Violence		
	Before marriage %	After marriage%
Yes	20	71
No	80	29

Experience of Physical Violence		
	Before marriage %	After marriage %
Yes	20	71
No	80	29

6. Normalisation of violence—silent subjugation

The girls develop such a high threshold for violence that one may even feel that their married life is not that bad after all. If the atmosphere in the family is supportive and congenial and she has support to take care of the children, there is a sense of satisfaction to go on with life, if the husband and mother-in-law are not excessively abusive. Even then there is undoubtedly work to do, repeated pregnancies, and compromises in everyday life.

For example, the marriage of a 15-year-old girl —who did all the housework, wage work, delivered a baby in the first year of marriage and pregnant again, and beaten up by her husband once in a while when he is drunk — appears to be successful, compared to girls who faced violence on a daily basis. At least the husband took her out to visit the temple and accompanied her to her mother's house. Violence is normalised in such situations where the girl feels that the marriage is all right

I think he is OK

'I live with my in-laws, do all the work at home and also work as a casual labourer. I had a normal delivery and went to my mother's house to deliver. My son is one year old. I am back in my mother's house and full term pregnant. My husband is a casual labourer. He drinks when out with friends and beats me when he comes home drunk — on any issue — say, when I ask him about anything he does, money or drinking or if I did not cook properly. Even if we do not go out together, we visit the temple during festivals and sometimes, my mother's house. My husband is keen to let me continue my studies. But can I? I think he is OK. He is at least thinking about my future and my education.' (*Sujatha, 18, dropped out of school in class 7 She has a son and is pregnant*).

7. Sexual violence, health, pregnancy and subjugation

None of the married girls were prepared for sexual relations with the husband. They are pushed into a situation of sexual violence involving bites, scratches and physical injuries that they could not have anticipated. They do not share their experiences of regular assault that continues day after day, week after week for years, which deeply impacts their lives. They complain of aches and pains, weakness and exhaustion, without being able to mention sexual trauma. They are unable to say no to violence because they

perceive their lack of power. Is it the pressure of years of patriarchy and domination that has silenced them?

Unprepared for sexual life- abuse and insanity

'I was only 14 when I got married. Soon after, I was sent to the in-laws' house. I and my husband were locked in a room and he forced himself on me. I ran to the door and sat scared in the corner of the room and cried all night. I was so afraid that I did not want to be alone with him. My mother's house was in the same village and I would run there every other night. This went on for six months. Neighbours scolded me, pressuring me to get into the rhythm of married life. My in-laws were worried that I would never bear children. The pressure was so much that I attempted suicide. My friend rescued me but my mother was not willing to help me in any manner.'

(The matter was taken up by the kulam panchayat on an appeal from the husband's family. The girl's mother had to pay a fine of Rs.10,000 to settle the divorce after the hearing. She is back in her mother's house— abused and treated worse than a slave by her mother and other family members for bringing disrepute. She is currently going through intense depression and is at the edge of insanity.

(Ponnala Navya, 16 studying in class 9, when her marriage was arranged.,

The subjugation of the girl is complete when the marital family not only dictates the work she has to do but also sooner than later the status of her pregnancy and child bearing. The idea of marriage is closely linked to bearing children. Not having children is seen as a fault and incapacity of the girl and she is condemned for not doing what is so natural for women and is ostracized as a 'barren woman'. There is enormous pressure to see her conceive at the earliest thereby giving a sanction to marital rape. That she has no children is a reason to be cruel to her and to exercise control.

When there are no in-laws and the husband is an orphan, it should be easier to get on without being harassed or taunted for bring barren. But even then, the girl is condemned by the neighbourhood and extended family when there are no signs of conceiving, even after one year of marriage. It is not just the in-laws who control the girl, but the larger community which wants to exercise control.

Pressure to bear children

'When I was 14 years old, my marriage was fixed to my aunt's son who is a truck driver. I did not want to marry and tried hard to stop it, but my parents forced me, saying we were poor. I have two younger sisters and they could ill afford delaying my marriage. I had two miscarriages and my health is poor, I have aches and pains and am always fatigued. With difficulty, my husband took me to a doctor (gynaecologist), who said there is some problem with my uterus and that I need treatment. There is so much violence from my mother-in law and father-in-law for not bearing a child - they pull my hair, bang my head against the wall, push me and knock my head with their knuckles. I shout back and scream but it has no effect on them. They are so angry and disappointed that I do not have children'. *(Anumaraju Rajeshwari, 19 studied upto class 4 She had 2 miscarriages and has poor health. .*

The girls' body belongs to everyone else but her. Even though the in-laws and husband fully know that prenatal sex determination tests are illegal, such tests are still pursued and there are pressures to abort if the ultrasound shows that foetus is female. It is unthinkable that she can exercise her opinion on the matter. In fact, it is sacrilege to consider that she has a mind of her own.

Repeated pregnancies and Control over Body

'Due to overwork, carrying heavy loads, lack of food and my husband's abuses, I had a miscarriage after six months of pregnancy. My mother came to help me at home and recuperate. Within two months, I was pregnant again. This time, my mother took over my work and I successfully gave birth to a baby girl. The family including my mother-in-law was unhappy and hurled abuses at me. I was getting weak with work and taking care of my baby girl. Six months later I was pregnant again. My husband and his mother insisted that I get my foetus scanned to find out if it was a girl or a boy. They found that it was a girl and forced me to have an abortion. I resisted but they would not listen and got the doctor to induce an abortion. Four months, later I got pregnant again. This is my fourth pregnancy, and it has weakened me. I am very anaemic, have no food as it costs money and so much work to do. My mother-in-law is abusing me in anticipation that I would give birth to another girl. My husband too drinks and beats me up. Any reason is a reason to beat me. What a family I have got into where all are alcoholics! They brew their own

liquor. Bootleggers! When I tell my mother that I am being ill-treated, she said that since my father beat her, there is nothing wrong in my husband beating me, his wife'. *Shailaja, 17 was studying in class IX when she got married. She first had a miscarriage; her second born was a daughter; she had a miscarriage again during her third pregnancy; and she is now pregnant again..)*

If the girl gives birth to a female child, the control is even more. The husband does not visit her for months together, neither do the in-laws contact her. There are demands from the husband's family for more money, land or other assets in lieu of taking the girl and the newborn to the marital home. The girl's family yields to make peace, but the abuses continue for giving birth to a girl and bringing bad luck to the family. Giving birth to a female child is used as justification for even more torture.

Delivery of a girl baby-another excuse for domination and control

'After about two years of marriage I was pregnant and very anaemic. The doctor scolded me and my husband for getting pregnant so early. She said that the foetus may not survive. I was sent to my mother's place and delivered a baby girl in a private hospital. It was a C Section and I was very weak. My mother is going through depression and has no energy to support me. My younger sister is also mentally unstable. My father pleaded with the neighbors to help me in the hospital when I was in labor. It is my father who took all the trouble. He is also tired. My mother-in-law was angry that I delivered a baby girl. My husband too never came to see me. Why are my in-laws not coming to see my baby? I stayed with my parents for five months with the baby and became very anxious. Then we got a message that I could join my husband only on the condition that we paid a price for not giving birth to a boy. My father had already spent a lot for my delivery. He had drained all his money on my health. With difficulty and after a lot of bargaining with his son-in law, he gave away 36 *guntas* of land, his prized possession. My husband demanded 15 goats too. My father had to beg and borrow money to meet all the demands and sent me to my in-laws. They treat me very badly, scold me constantly and punish me for having a daughter. I am forced to do all the work, particularly because my husband's brother has three children—all boys. My husband has stopped talking to me and I do not know if he will ever talk to me. I am five months pregnant again. But how can I go to my mothers' house? My father is in grief as my mother passed away due to an electric shock. This time I will have to suffer. I have no proper food to eat. When I seek

help from the anganwadi centre, they refuse to give me food because I am 16 years old. They say I have to be 18 to get food and other facilities of the anganwadi. They asked me to get my age changed to 18 years in the Aadhaar card. Where is the time to do that? In fact, I have no time even to talk to the anganwadi workers about supplementary nutrition or any matter on maternal health care. My life is full of troubles. I have become weak and do not have food to eat. I am overworked. My only wish is that nobody should have a life like mine.' (*Renuka, 16 dropped out of school in class VII. One girl C Section*).

In case the girl gives birth to a male child, is it any better? It seems not. She is scolded and abused even when she gives birth to a son.

Delivering male children too brings violence

'I was just about 13 and was married to a 22-year-old man. After a year of marriage, I delivered a baby boy. It was a normal delivery and my mother took me to my in-laws. I started doing all the housework, going to the fields to work and returning to work at home again. There was no rest. I have three sons. All through my pregnancies, there was no healthcare. The anganwadi workers used to give some eggs every fortnight to take home, but which I could never consume

Mardannapalle Pallavi, 17 studied up to class 7. She now has three sons

When there is a loss of baby, there is seldom any sympathy for the girl. She is not even allowed to grieve over her loss. Instead, she is blamed for letting down the family and husband and cursed for not adding to the family's progeny. All sympathies are reserved for the father. Also, there is always the threat of the husband remarrying.

Losing a baby – Lack of sympathy and another reason to control

'Within nine months of marriage I was carrying a baby. My whole body started swelling and I was taken to a private hospital. The doctor said I was very weak and that my blood count was low. She performed cervical stitches and advised complete bed rest. I could not rest and did a lot of work as usual. I had acute stomach ache in the eighth month of pregnancy and rushed to the hospital. They were actually labour pains; the foetus died in the womb and was removed after a caesarean. I was told that I should have taken rest. I recuperated and continued my daily routine of housework and agricultural work.

After 18 months, I conceived again and had similar problems as the previous pregnancy. This time I took bed rest and delivered a baby boy. I was in my mothers' house till the baby was five months old and my husband and in-laws took us back to their home. I went to work on cotton fields while my mother-in-law took care of my son. When the baby was given booster injections, he developed fever and we consulted the doctor. The fever increased and he was taken to a bigger hospital, where the doctor said there were no chances of his survival. I lost my son.

I went to my mother's house and after two months, returned to my in-laws. My mother-in-law accused me of being insensitive to the loss of two children. She heaped accusations about me to outsiders – saying that I have no children, being weak and an evil force. They now constantly taunt me, saying that I have betrayed them and their son, as I can't have any more children.

She grumbles and is sarcastic. She complains, 'Why must my son go through such difficulties?' They make me feel guilty for losing my children. She makes me do a lot of work - sweeping, clearing the goat shed, cooking, fetching water and other domestic chores. I have no rest at all. I earn Rs.400-600 a day during season and my mother-in-law collects my entire wage directly from the employer. They are still not happy. I can't ask them for anything. I am not offered food, no new clothes have been bought and no money is given to me. I have no voice or freedom. There is daily tension. My husband too goes away with his goats for 4-5 days. I am not able to go to my mother's home as I have no peace of mind. My mother too is not visiting me as she feels they will send me away with her and I will be divorced. (*Uppula Sowjanaya, 20, studied till Class X. She had an infant mortality(girl) and a child(boy) death after a year.)*

The very survival of these girls and their children is a miracle, given the highly risky nature of pregnancies. Complications in pregnancy, C-sections and being forced to seek treatment at private hospitals sink the family into abject poverty. The girl's health condition and well-being is nobody's concern. Masculinity deters the husband from showing any soft emotions like kindness, love, caring, warmth or simply a human touch. The family refrains from showing any sympathy to the girl's deteriorating health condition as it would also mean taking responsibility to make her better. This commitment may also entail spending on her health. In effect they would have to yield the power to control and therefore the lack of culture to take interest in women's health and her pregnancy is in built.

The girls are expected to work until the last date of delivery. Any mention of tiredness is reprimanded. The girls too feel that they can ask for food to eat, only if they work. When she has children, she works even harder to make sure that her children do not starve. As time passes by, she becomes weak, suffers from ill health and the cycle of violence grows. 86 per cent of girls were working until the final trimester of pregnancy while 60 per cent started working by the fourth month after childbirth, and 35 per cent started working after the seventh month after giving birth. Yet, they live in hope that things would get better.

76 per cent of the girls gave birth and 56 per cent of babies were born within two years of marriage. The rest continue to bear the stigma of being barren. The fact that these girls are children - young girls barely in the age group of 13-15 years - is barely recognised.

During the first delivery, 62 per cent gave birth to females. 50 per cent of the girls and their husbands and 74 per cent of mothers-in-law were unhappy that they delivered girl babies.

Of 57 pregnancies, 15 per cent had miscarriages, 32 per cent had C-sections and the rest were normal deliveries. Of the eleven miscarriages, one girl had four miscarriages and she had no support at all. None in the family, not even her husband knew about it. Two girls had two miscarriages each; three other girls had one miscarriage each. Of the 13 C-sections, three girls had second time C-sections. Of a total of 51 deliveries, 4 per cent were stillborn, 4 per cent had neonatal mortality and 6 per cent were

unwell. Scanning was done for 23 girls for sex determination and in three cases, they were aware of the sex of the child.

In 78 per cent of the cases, the ASHA worker contacted the girl when she was pregnant. In 92 per cent cases, the girls went through antenatal checkups and 71 per cent received checkups thrice. All of them had tetanus vaccination.

While the health of the girl deteriorates with each pregnancy, it must be recognised that such girls have experienced ill health and lack of attention all through their married life.

Condition of health – before and after marriage

- 33 per cent of girls had ill health before marriage while 78 per cent of girls had ill health after marriage.
- 7 per cent complained about body aches and pains before marriage while 30 per cent complained of body aches and pains after marriage.
- 5 per cent were depressed before marriage and 15 per cent of girls were depressed following marriage.
- 2 per cent of girls said they felt lonely prior to marriage while 37 per cent felt lonely after marriage.
- 74 per cent stated that they had good health before marriage while nobody said they had good health after marriage.

8. Subjugation of Mind and Agency

Due to the pressure of work, hunger and starvation, ill-health, repeated pregnancy and the risks thereof, child rearing hostility in the marital home and loneliness, married girls are victims of unspeakable violence and are sunk in a black hole without redemption. Each form of violence at every sphere of her existence is part of a totality of control. In this sense the separation of body and mind, physical, sexual and mental violence is heuristic.

There is a victim waiting to be heard in each household. They can expect no support from relatives who were enthusiastic about fixing the marriage or neighbours who have full knowledge of the girl's torture by the husband's family. These issues are considered private and internal family affairs and nobody interferes once the marriage is

fixed. However, despite the limited space for maneuvering, some girls have tried to fight valiantly. Angry protests, acts of individual resistance and assertions of selfhood have taken place. They have succeeded in living apart from the in-laws, rejected their machinations and set up families of their own. Though peace followed in some situations, the husband continued to come home drunk and beat her up occasionally. Some husbands became more violent as they felt guilty for showing loyalty to the wife and not the mother. A man can also become violent if his peers mock him for listening to the wife — this offends his masculinity. Yet, forcing the husband to move out of his parents' house is an exercise of agency.

Fight for separation from in-laws

'I had to fetch water and do the entire housework like cooking, washing clothes and dishes despite the doctor advising against strenuous work. My step mother-in-law would do nothing and was quarrelsome. She never let me eat until my husband came home and had eaten. I did not have food to eat as a result. Due to all this, I had miscarriages twice within one year and became ill.

I now live separately with my husband and have a son. I still have to do a lot of work but do not have the tensions of dealing with my in-laws. My husband has become more violent and abusive, has taken to drinking and is also addicted to 'nasham' which is chewed for intoxication. He sleeps till 11.30 a.m in the morning and goes to work late and is very casual.

'(Kaalivala Swapna, 20, never went to school. She had 2 miscarriages in the first year of marriage and a successful delivery in the third year.)

Girls have shown courage in not just persuading their husbands to set up another establishment, but also worked hard to see that the husband gives up his brutal violence, changes his stance against his wife and is a reformed person. This form of exercising agency has meant that the girls have taken charge of their lives and tried to transform the marital relationship to one based on mutual respect. There have also been occasions when the girl has stood bravely in front of caste elders and the public, narrated her woes and sought justice from the 'kulam panchayat'⁷ to resolve issues in her favor.

As a last resort, girls have also taken the step of leaving the husband and his family for good. It is both an act of courage and desperation and usually involves a huge calculation for the girl. She has to weigh the odds of coping with stigma attached to leaving the husband, consider the marriage prospects of younger sisters, the impact on parents who feel they are no longer responsible for the married daughter and what the 'kulam' would say. They return to the parent's home only after trying hard to adjust, bearing humiliation, violence, isolation, hunger and hard work in the hope that an uncertain future would be better than a horrible past.

⁷ 'Kulam panchayats' or 'caste panchayats' are traditional local bodies within a caste whose elders arbitrate to resolve disputes and pronounce a verdict.

A relentless lonely fight

'For the first two years, there was no consummation of marriage. My mother-in-law would accuse me of not having children and used that as an excuse to beat me up. I picked up courage one day and confronted her, saying that she very well knew that there has been no sexual contact between me and my husband and how did she expect me to have children. She said I could leave the house if I was so unhappy. Her son would find another girl.

I was so enraged that I asked the 'kulam panchayat' to meet and settle the matter of my divorce. Then I made a public statement in front of the community about my marriage not being consummated and also about the violence from in-laws. The 'kulam panchayat' agreed to a divorce and also accepted my parents demand that the dowry of Rs.3 lakh be returned to compensate for the divorce. At this demand, my-in laws took me back home and two months later, I conceived.

My entire duration of pregnancy was a torture. I craved for food but was not given anything. There was total hostility in the atmosphere. I don't know how I survived, until I went to my mother's home for my delivery. My doctor said it was a breech baby and wanted my husband's permission to proceed with the surgery. He refused to come and disowned any responsibility until my parents with support from caste elders threatened him. He came on the condition that the baby should not be a girl and dark like me. I delivered a baby girl and stayed in my mother's house for recuperation. My husband and his family did not visit me for three months. My parents sought the help of the 'kulam panchayat', which met again and threatened my husband and mother-in-law to take me and the child back.

Nothing has changed in my relationship with the in-laws and husband. If anything, it has become worse. My baby is so undernourished. When my parents celebrated the baby's first birthday, my mother-in-law refused to bless me or the child. She pushed me against the wall for celebrating my daughter's birthday against her wishes and I was so hurt that I sought refuge at my mother's place. My husband and his family did not come to fetch me back. This caused a great amount of anxiety and my parents sought help yet again from 'kulam panchayat' to resolve the matter.

Once again the panchayat met and recommended that I go back and also that my husband and I live separately from his mother. I told them I did not want to return in any circumstances and wanted a clean break from that wretched family. I said I had no strength to tolerate this cycle of violence, come home to parents, have a panchayat hearing, return to my husband and face domestic violence again. The caste elders threatened to withdraw support if I did not take their advice.

I am isolated completely with no contact with anyone. I have stopped going to my mother's house. I feel that it does not help. I will only be a burden on them. They did whatever they could. My husband is as unsympathetic and violent as ever'.

Prasanna tonsured her hair, looked frail and anaemic, has lost weight and has no strength at all or will to live. Totally unrecognizable.

When girls leave their husband and in-laws, they have nowhere to go. She becomes an outsider in her own house in the eyes of her parents. She faces the stigma of leaving her husband and goes through the loss of dignity. The girl faces pressure not just from the family but also the wider community. They advise her to return to the marital house, no matter what. But she decides to stay on with her parents even when she is not welcome.

Repeated Miscarriages and Neglect

'My husband is an auto driver. He works one day and rests for four days following that. Drinking has affected his health. Since my husband is irregular at work and unwell, I had to work overtime to earn wages, run the house and look after his younger sister who has a heart problem and is just three months younger than me. I also have to serve my sister-in-law who escaped from her husband and is staying with us with her two children, 5 and 3 years old. She was kidnapped by her own husband who was a sadist and demanded a ransom. He also forced her into prostitution. He was caught and beaten up. Another sister-in-law also came back with her two children since her husband was a drunkard and torturing her. She has gone back after her husband was counselled. I had the responsibility of looking after all of them.

I was new to agricultural work but was soon compelled to learn to pluck cotton, do cross-pollination and sow paddy. Within two months of marriage, I got pregnant and had a miscarriage in the fourth month of pregnancy. I felt very weak. When I consulted the doctor she said that my blood level is very low and asked me to have a good diet and bed rest. She scolded me for becoming pregnant at such a young age and said I should take care of my health. But where is the time to rest? I had to do all the work, else the family would starve. In a matter of two years, I had four miscarriages. There was no medical help in any of the pregnancies. Each miscarriage took place in the first trimester and I was at home each time, without anyone's help or knowledge. I had severe bleeding after each miscarriage. I went to my mother's home for rest. But I had to return because my husband's family was so much dependent on my earnings. They would collapse if I did not go.

I was over-worked, in ill health and totally devastated. There was nobody to take care of me in my husband's house. I returned to my parent's house and do not want to go back. My parents feel I should go back at the earliest as my husband is a good person and does not ill-treat me. They say he is my aunt's son and we should not let him down and that my husband is sad as I am not going back to him. They sometimes tell me that he is my only future as nobody will marry me especially after four miscarriages. They keep pressuring me to go every day, using all kinds of arguments. I don't want to go. I question them 'I am your only daughter, have I become a burden to you?' I have had enough of frequent miscarriages and the heavy workload. There is not even enough food to eat. I am tired and not willing to go back'.

(Roja looks thin, sick and very weak. She cried and said 'I am frightened, scared and shivering. I want to die. It is just a waste to live.' She has no food and goes around the neighbourhood begging for rice, oil and some food. Neighbours felt sorry for her in the beginning and tried to give her some supplies but now they avoid her. She is going through immense anxiety and depression. She curses her parents for not listening to her and getting her married at such a young age. The community is working on her husband to abandon her and remarry since she miscarried four times. She feels that no other girl should face problems as she did.

Roja, 17 studying in class 9 when she got married. She has had four miscarriages and is back at her maternal home)..

In all these instances, each of them regrets being married so young. Some girls are determined that their younger sisters should continue to study and not be pushed into marriage. The catharsis comes when they are able to take a public stand against child marriage and motivate others not to succumb to marriage before they are 18 years of age.

Just tracing some aspects of the life of these young girls indicates how a sense of urgency is required to bring about transformation in their lives and the lives of millions like them in the society.

Exercise of agency and break from marital Home

'I got married when I was 13 years old to Venkatesh from the Lambada tribe. Venkatesh never went to school and worked as a bonded labourer in his village. His mother is an ayah (care giver) at the anganwadi centre. My sister-in law has completed Class X and stays at home with us. I have been treated badly since the day I got married. I can't tell you how my mother-in-law and sister-in-law pulled my hair and beat me even after I yelled, screamed and cried. It had no effect on them. They became more violent if I raised my voice.

I am a Chenchu and they are Lambadis and the entire neighbourhood comprises of Lambadis, I felt lonely. I did not know their language. Nobody came near me or spoke to me. My in-laws, even my father-in-law, told everyone that I was evil and showed how I could not even cook properly. They poured water in the dal I made and when my husband came home, it angered him so much that he would beat me. He would always come home fully drunk and spoke foul language. He was never nice to me. He was under his mother's influence.

They never gave me food to eat. I starved most of the time and had to work without any help. My mother-in law took away whatever wages I earned. I had no money and never bought anything for myself. My husband never asked me if I needed anything. I had no courage to talk to him. I lived like this for a year-and-a-half. I wanted to die. My parents were so poor that I did not want to complain to them. So I did not even see them. 'I could not bear the torture any more. I thought to myself that I don't want that husband anymore or that work and that family. I decided to go home which was at least 100 km away. I slipped out of the house early in the morning on pretext of going to work, walked 8 km to the nearest bus stand, afraid that I would be caught. I was relieved that nobody saw

me. I took a bus to Mannawaripalli and begged for money to buy a ticket. I collected Rs. 25 from some people and got down at Brahmanapalli. I walked 3 km in the Mannanur forest. I was not afraid or anxious. I had nothing in my mind at that time and reached Mannanur town.

Where and how do I go from here? I met a known auto driver from my village and said to him that I had no money and requested him to drop me off along the way. He looked at me with sympathy and dropped me at Ippaipalli. It was late in the evening by then. I had nothing to eat. But never mind. I am going home, I felt. There I took another auto, a friend of my father's, who enquired about me. I did not tell him much. He dropped me off 5 km from my village Bapannapadu. I had to walk 5 km in the night, waiting to reach home and see my mother and father. When I reached home in the night, my mother was shocked to see me and the condition I was in. She is very understanding and has not asked me to go back.'

(In the meantime, her in-laws called for a Lambadi panchayat to bring her back. Eedamma gathered courage and spoke about how badly she was treated and all her ordeals. She said that she had lost her health, became weak and was physically and mentally broken. The Lambadi community panchayat decided it was her fault and that she should join her husband. But she has refused to go back and has been staying with her parents since eight months. She works with her mother on cotton farms, mirchi farms and has found her peace. But she looked emaciated and sick, her hair disheveled and as if in a trance while she narrated her story.)

Mandi Eedamma, 17, dropped out in class 3. She has no children.

8. Role of 'kulam panchayats' –reinforcing subjugation

Girls often seek justice from the 'kulam panchayat'. For example, a girl had taken the courageous step of pleading the stopping of her marriage since the prospective husband was in a relationship with another woman and was known to be a criminal who had committed a murder. She was forced to marry him and delivered two girl babies consecutively after which he continued his relationship with the other woman. The girl then appealed to the 'kulam panchayat' for restoration of conjugal rights. However, the kulam panchayat declared that the man can reject her for having delivered two girl babies.

Appeal to Kulam Panchayat- continuance of patriarchal solutions

'I got married when I was studying in Class VI. I have a sister and she is in school. The match was brought by my aunt and she said that he was an only son, well-off and would provide support to the family. I came to know that he had an affair with a married woman with two children. It was also rumored that he killed the woman's husband in collusion with her. The woman was then thrown out and she moved to a nearby village. I came to know that he continued to visit her in that village. I did not want this marriage and protested. I brought it before the 'kulam panchayat' to settle the issue once and for all. They said that all arrangements for the wedding had been made and were wary of the stigma that would be attached to me if it was called off. The kulam elders felt my younger sister would not get married if I called off the match.

At the panchayat, the man was asked to take a vow that he would have nothing to do with the other woman, drop his illicit relationship and marry me. I got married and went to my in-laws' house. I was new to work because I went to school before marriage and did only light work at home. My mother-in-law was frustrated at my being so inefficient and scolded me often. My husband was also not kind and taunted me a lot. Within a year of marriage, I delivered a baby girl in my mother's house. My husband resumed his illicit relationship on the sly. I was very unhappy and he never came to see me. It seems he was angry that I gave birth to a girl. After a lot of persuasion from my parents, his mother came home and took me back. She was even more violent after I returned. She never helped me with my daughter and would not give us enough food to eat. I had to work day in and day out. My husband never held his child. When I asked him about his affair with the other woman, he would thrash me and I was asked to mind my own business.

I felt sad and depressed. I was carrying again and sent home for delivery. I was very weak and in poor health. He told me that he wanted a boy the second time, but I delivered a baby girl and hence he never took me back. He told my parents he would take me and the children back, only if they presented gold to the baby.

I came to know that he has brought the other woman home. It seems my mother-in-law opposed it and asked her to leave. But my husband is adamant in maintaining the relationship. Again, I asked the 'kulam panchayat' to resolve the issue. The panchayat has not helped since my husband used the birth of two daughters as his excuse for rejection. I am so weak and have no will to live. I will not go back to him, ever.

Pilli Pavani, 16, dropped out in class VI, She has two girls. Lives with parents

Quite expectedly, the verdict of the 'kulam panchayats' — more often than not — stays within the boundaries of preserving marriage and patriarchal values. It could also result in her parents being forced to pay an unaffordable amount to end the marriage, which results in her enslavement by the family for causing stigma and expense.

In exceptional cases, the 'kulam panchayat' delivers verdicts favouring the girl. For example, when a girl's family appealed to the 'kulam panchayat' against the father-in-law who sexually abused her and her abusive husband who was violent, the 'kulam panchayat' issued a settlement of divorce in her favour. It continued to be fair to the girl when she remarried and pressed for justice against the harassment by her mother-in-law. This girl had remarried a divorcee who had two sons and tensions began in the family after she gave birth to a son. Her mother-in-law accused her of being partial to her son as against the stepchildren. The 'kulam panchayat' resolved tensions with a decision that asked the mother-in-law to look after the stepchildren while the girl and her husband lived in a separate home.

Accessing kulam panchayat for settling marital disputes

'I was about 15 years old when I was married to a person from my caste. Both of us, me and my husband were into begging. My father-in-law was sexually abusing me. I told my husband but he would not believe me. We quarreled a lot and I was very unhappy. I told my parents that I did not want to continue with the marriage as I had to face unbearable tensions. I could not tell them more than this. I showed them the bruises I had and this worried them. I suffered like this for 18 months.

My father asked the 'kulam panchayat' to settle the issue. The elders heard our case after we spent a lot of money on liquor and payment. They agreed for a divorce. I was so relieved and came back to my parents' house.

After a couple of months, a common friend of the family asked my parents if I would marry a divorcee who already had two sons. They readily agreed to this match even without consulting me as they felt that I would be well settled. I had no say in the matter and got married to a 26-year-old man and joined his family. He took good care of me but the family was very poor. I also took good care of his children, as if they were my own. I had to work hard and also beg for a living.

After one year, I became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. Soon after, my mother-in-law insisted that I have a sterilisation done. I did not want the operation and resisted. She put a lot of pressure on me and began telling my husband that I was being partial to my son and not taking care of his children. My husband too became very suspicious. No matter what I did, they were not convinced that I looked after all children as my own. I shared these tensions with my mother.

The matter about the pressure for sterilisation was brought up before the kulam panchayat. There were discussions for two full days on this. I was very frightened about escalating the issue up to this level. What the verdict would be, I wondered. It was decided that nobody can force sterilisation and also that my mother-in-law takes care of my husband's children in her house while we move out to set up another house. My husband is unhappy about the decision.

I overworked as a daily wage worker, took to begging and also carry petromax lights on my head during wedding processions while carrying my son on my hip. I try my best to keep my husband satisfied, make both ends meet, buy clothes for my stepchildren and cook food for them during festivals. I keep hoping that my husband does not have any complaint against me. My health is deteriorating and I feel very weak. But life has to go on'.

(Kundamanchi Ramulamma, 19 years school drop out at class VII ;one son

Although there is inconsistency and arbitrariness in the verdicts of the 'kulam panchayat', it is preferred by all parties since it is considered fair, more accessible, has the *appearance* of justice and the approval of all in the community. It is seemingly a more rooted system of justice within the community, where elders who are familiar to both parties (without reference to case law or precedence and only relying on their inherited patriarchal wisdom) deliver a verdict that has to be accepted by all. On occasion, it has an upper hand even over the police in framing charges against the husband.

However, it lacks any constitutionality and violates internationally upheld principles of child rights, especially those upholding the 'best interest of the child'. On the other hand, the criminal and civil justice system is considered alien, procedural, tedious, cumbersome and opaque. It is also time consuming, mediated by lawyers and expensive.

9. Impoverishment, family and subjugation

The families under this study live precariously, survive on hard work and physical labour, depend on daily wages and are often under employed. There is never a reserve of food stocks. Therefore, in times of unemployment, ill health and expenditure, they all but collapse since they cannot make ends meet. Owing to poverty, there is no question of a newly married couple being able to live by themselves. In the rural context, this is even more difficult since they are part of joint families. The logic of early marriage is also to have an additional earning member. In the urban context too, it is not easy for young couples to make home on their own. This is especially true when they migrate in search of work. The issues of housing, shelter and privacy, congeniality while sharing space, earning a livelihood for basic survival and other challenges bring out the worst and foster rivalries within the family. With pregnancy and the requirement of rest and leisure, and ensuing childbirth, tensions increase manifold.

Poverty compels the family and the community around it to be entrenched in patriarchal values, reinforces violence and tolerates total subjugation in the name of preserving the institution of marriage.

Family and parental support under these circumstances is structured to reproduce a patriarchal society with a clear subordinate role for the girl/woman. From childhood onwards, parents and the community prepare girls to accept control unquestioningly, as if it is natural that girls are unequal and have no privileges compared to boys. She is inducted into the world of domestic slavery and wage work. Simultaneously, she is groomed to be a submissive person who will leave the house sooner than later to join her marital home. Even if some parents see the value of education and send their girls to school, pressure is built to get her married by neighbours and relatives who usually bring matrimonial alliances.

Girls show their disinclination and unhappiness, but to no avail. Justifications by the family are many - the parents are poor, they have other daughters to get married, the grandparents are old, or the man is well settled, from a good family, a similar good opportunity might not come again and so on. There is an element of emotional blackmail, making it difficult for her to refuse. Any act of defiance invites violence, boycott and the threat of disowning the girl. Even when she argues that the man is much older or undesirable, she is overruled. Despite an upbringing of being totally controlled with no space for autonomy, girls do question. But mostly, they are unsuccessful. The family becomes the first site of loss of independence in a girl's life.

- **Self-perception of married girls**

The girls were asked about how they felt about themselves after the daylong interview. Here are some of the responses

- 48 per cent said that they felt lonely and had no one to seek support from.
- 76 per cent were anxious about their children and their future.
- 92 per cent described themselves as non-aggressive.
- 97 per cent said they were not rough.
- 65 per cent said they were submissive.
- 88 per cent thought they were emotional.
- 92 per cent could not take decisions easily.
- 13 per cent said they were independent.
- 6 per cent said that in-laws considered their opinions seriously.
- Despite everything, 70 per cent thought they could manage their lives, come what may.
- 71 per cent said they were fighters and would not give up.
- Interestingly, 61 per cent said that they were happy at being married.

- **Independence and autonomy of the married child**
- Because she is just a child, many aspects of her life remain almost similar in the natal and marital house.
- 80 per cent of girls had to get permission to purchase personal items, both before and after marriage.
- 57 per cent were controlled with regard to their clothing choices before marriage, while 63 per cent were controlled after marriage.
- 13 per cent expressed opinions in discussions before marriage while only 4 per cent stated they could do so after marriage.
- 85 per cent of girls stated that they could eat what/when they wanted before marriage and only 35 per cent could do so after marriage.

The financial commitments made in getting her married drain the family. She is fully conscious about the weight of the sacrifices by her parents. Therefore, when she faces untold adversities in the marital home, she refrains from sharing or asking for parental support. In the context of pregnancy and childbirth, there is a tradition of going to the natal house for delivery. All expenses for delivery, health care and hospitalisation are met by the parents. If it is a girl baby, the parents are forced to compensate by yielding to the additional demands made by the husband and in-laws to take her back home. It takes a toll on the family. She is witness to the trials and tribulations of the parents and their obligation to send her back to the marital house at every stage. She does not have the option of refusing or staying back. As we have seen, even her appeal to the 'kulam panchayat' only ends up in her continuing in the marital life.

When girls have exercised agency to walk out of the marital home, they seek support from the family. What is the support that her parental family can give? First, the family is located in the context of a society and as an institution is influenced by hegemonising tendencies in society. Thus when some girls walk out of the marital home along with children (if any) and seek refuge at the natal home, she knows very well that the parents cannot support her. It is both unaffordable and unacceptable to have a girl break away from marriage. They discourage her from overstaying and persuade her to go back to married life. Yet, she persists against all odds since this is the only place she can call her own. It is only on rare occasions that the family extends full support to the daughter.

It is found that for most girls, family is not a care giving institution. It is an institution that trains her to be submissive and accept domination of all sorts. There is nothing sacrosanct about family as far as girls are concerned.

10. Sanctified subjugation and NOT child marriage

These narratives of child marriage tell us that it is not a social evil caused by tradition and culture. It is a form of exploitation that takes advantage of tradition and culture, forcing girls to do domestic work and drives them as fulltime agricultural labourers or workers in the informal sector. Child marriage builds an army of invisible and hidden labour which is forced to contribute to the economy.

Studies have shown low participation of girls in the labour force due to repeated pregnancies, childbirth without spacing, and miscarriages and abortions at the cost of her health. 'Women who survive severe complications while giving birth often require lengthy recovery times and along with long-term physical, psychological, social consequences, can also experience economic consequences, including withdrawal from the labour force⁸. Further it is stated that, "The inability to earn decent wages, shocks of ill health and expenditure on health care, violence at home increase household poverty, increase vulnerability to economic shocks, lower income diversity, and incentivize short-term allocation decisions at the expense of longer-term investments in human and physical capital. At the more aggregate level, this may lead to lower levels of physical well-being, reduced investment, and lower productivity, all of which influence economic growth. These factors, in turn, may have significant intergenerational impacts, leading to poorer health among children and lower levels of investment in education and other forms of human capital accumulation, as well as a reduced ability to address shocks such as illness, all of which increase the likelihood of early marriage in subsequent generations⁹.'

She is also trapped in unpaid domestic work and compelled to take care of her children.

In spite of evidence that the participation of the girl in the labour force to her fullest potential is weak and that it does not contribute to the economic growth of the communities and societies it is clear from narrative after narrative that there is a demand

⁸Jennifer Parsons, Jeffrey Edmeades, Aslihan Kes, Suzanne Petroni, Maggie Sexton & Quentin Wodon (2015) Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: A Review of the Literature, The Review of Faith & International Affairs, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15570274.2015.1075757>

⁹ ibid

for girls' labour from the in-laws house and so she is forced into a marriage. They are pushed into work till they wear out. This push is socially constructed. It forms the body and mind of each of the individuals, perhaps in various degrees among all others in society. What constitutes a family, the intra household relationship of each of the members in the family, and division of labour in the household is defined in relation to her subjugation.

The structure of relations of production and exploitation of girls at home and at times on farms is aimed at reproducing the agrarian economy and sustaining the livelihoods of farmers and whatever profits earned by them. Their sacrifices and enslavement to sustain the agrarian economy and its growth goes unnoticed, unrecognised and is invisible. The suffering of these girls and their lives is seen in an isolated manner and not as integral to the life of the nation and its underdevelopment. This has implications for the culture and moral fibre of society and the country as a whole.

Thus, the girl is caught in an endless cycle of insults and humiliation; enveloped with loneliness and hostility at every step; subject to brutal violence and control that fills her cells with fear and anxiety; of hopelessness and resignation to fate; which pushes her into depression and to the edge of sanity; the tragic unfreedom that kills her soul, wastes her body and mind. Their resistance is ignored. Girls give up aspirations of realizing their potential. Voices of children and their anguish have no space. Such physical, mental and sexual violence of the girls has social approval as it is integral to the institution of child marriage. This violence assumes inviolability as the marriage is bound by rituals, religious invocations and the blessings of God. Since the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) does not make child marriage totally voidable, there is a legal sanction to the inherent violence¹⁰. With the force of social approval, blessings of god and legislative acceptance, the subjugation of the girl assumes sanctity. Therefore, this is sanctified subjugation and not just child marriage.

¹⁰ The PCMA is discussed in detail in Chapter 4

Chapter Three

Escaping sanctified subjugation—and the battle goes on

1. Introduction

As the earlier chapter shows, there is a need for complete rejection of child marriage. It is an abhorrent practice leading to subjugation and denial of the girl's status as a child. It stated that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) has failed to ensure the well-being of the child and argued that the State has abdicated its obligation of ensuring legal entitlements to girls and is thus an accomplice to sanctified subjugation.

This chapter discusses instances of children who have escaped sanctified subjugation. It is based on 26 narratives of girls, most of whom were 13-15 years old and from the districts of Suryapet, Vikarabad, Mahbubnagar and Hyderabad.

Childline in Vikarabad District collected data about marriages that were stopped. Childline Foundation India (CIF) is part of the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development and its 1098 helpline is a 24-hour free emergency phone outreach service for children across the country who are in need of care and protection.¹¹ Childline in Vikarabad was chosen because it plays an active role in rescuing children who need care and protection and many of their cases involve stopping child marriages. Police, schoolteachers and staff of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV), Child Welfare Committees (CWC) and local officials play an important role in this process. Their respective roles have been elaborated in the stoppage of child marriage. While one could collect details from the police department and Childline; officials in other departments did not maintain data on child marriages. Information about the roles of other officials was gathered through interviews with the police and Childline staff.

M V Foundation also conducted an intensive campaign in Vikarabad district against child marriage, for girls' education and gender equality. The campaign urged children and their defenders to call the Childline helpline (1098) should they need help.

The narratives highlight girls' resistance to marriage, nature of support received from youth, classmates, ordinary men and women, school teachers, policemen and other local officials and how they escaped their subjugation and succeeded in pursuing their education. While the experience of Childline provides an understanding of the role of local

¹¹ <http://www.childlineindia.org.in/cif.htm>

institutions and officials in stopping child marriages, the experience of M V Foundation is about creating an atmosphere and consciousness against child marriages and the synergy between an NGO and public institutions in stopping child marriages.

Finally, the chapter seeks to understand gaps in the PCMA and provisions which could have enabled the stopping of child marriages.

2. Profile of children whose marriages have been stopped

The data collected from the narratives of children whose marriages were stopped shows similarities with children whose marriages could not be stopped. The former too were from impoverished families with mostly illiterate parents. Here also, the girls had very little space for independent decisions. 84 per cent of girls had to take permission to go to the market, 81 per cent took permission for personal purchases and 93 per cent said they had no control over what they wore.

Yet, they still managed to be courageous and resisted family pressure to get married. Most marriages that were successfully stopped were of children in the age group of 13-15 years (65 per cent), followed by children of 16-17 years (19 per cent) and 12 years (15 per cent). Significantly, children even as young as 12 succeeded in defying their parents. 58 per cent were from Backward Classes (BCs), 19 per cent belonged to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 15 per cent were from Scheduled Tribes (STs). All were in school when their marriages were fixed — 12 per cent were in Class VII, 77 per cent were in Classes VIII-X and 12 per cent were in senior secondary School.

Children adopted several forms of protest to resist marriage. 75 per cent stated that they went on hunger strike, 10 per cent argued with their mothers, 5 per cent threatened to commit suicide, 5 per cent did not do any work at home and another 5 per cent stopped speaking to everyone at home.

73 per cent and 46 per cent told their mothers and fathers respectively that they did not want to get married. 53 per cent stated that their mothers threatened them if they refused to marry while 75 per cent were threatened by their fathers. The parents' argument was that family honour would be hurt if the marriage did not take place. 17 per cent said that the marriage could be postponed.

46 per cent were helped by anganwadi workers in stopping the marriage, 25 per cent received support from NGOs and 13 per cent were supported by school

teachers. Some said they received support from Childline, friends and relatives. None received support from community leaders.

48 per cent said their marriage was stopped by the gram panchayat, 13 per cent said NGOs stopped their marriage and 26 per cent stated that the police stopped their marriage. None of them received support from the village head, tehsildar or Child Marriage Prohibition Officer (CMPO).

93 per cent continued their education after the marriage was stopped while 6 per cent dropped out of school because it became tough to continue studying. 89 per cent were not treated well by their families after the marriage was stopped and 8 per cent said the groom's side pressurised their families.

3. Roles of functionaries in Vikarabad District in stopping child marriage

Child marriages were stopped through the intervention of Childline, which coordinated action among police, school teachers, KGBV and Childline staff, Child Welfare Committee and local officials.

Role of Police

The sub-inspector (SI) and head constable had a major role to play in stopping child marriage. They used their authority to summon, instill fear, invoke the law and book cases against the accused. All other officials such as the Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO), Mandal Development Officer (MDO), Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) school teachers, Childline staff, anganwadi and ASHA workers were bolstered through police support. Thus the police were indispensable for preventing and stopping a child marriage.

Thanks to police and District Collector- still pursuing education

'When I was in Class X, my marriage was fixed to a 25-year-old relative. I was 15 at the time. The anganwadi worker called Childline one day before the marriage. Childline contacted M V Foundation (MVF) and also the police. The next morning MVF volunteers and the police came home. By then, my family knew that my marriage was going to be stopped and decided not to make any public preparations. There were no signs of a wedding being held. My house was whitewashed and inside there were preparations for the 'devunilagnam' puja – but as if it was not for my wedding. We went to the nearby

temple to perform the marriage. In the meantime, the police came to the temple and — all of us — the families, bridegroom, me and everyone else attending the wedding were rounded up and taken to the police station. The police tried to negotiate, persuade and threaten. They told us about the child marriage law and that the marriage was illegal. I was tutored by my parents to say that I was willing and wanted the marriage. My family would just not relent and said that they had made all arrangements for the marriage. The bridegroom's parents announced that my marriage was already over and they would take me to their house.

The police felt we were being adamant and took us to the Collector's office. The Collector ordered that I be admitted into the KGBV and counseled my family, saying that she would immediately transfer Rs.10,000 to me and support my education. She did not allow my mother take me home. I completed Class X in KGBV and was allowed to take the exam in the village, escorted by constables with strict instructions from the Collector that my family would not be allowed to meet me. I am now studying Class XI or first year Intermediate¹² in Sadashivpet Junior College.'

The family rued that they had accumulated debt worth Rs.4 lakh, purchased gold and had become a laughing stock. The Collector has said that all children who are 5-18 years of age have to study. If there is a child marriage, the teacher and anganwadi worker will be suspended. There were no complaints about MVF stopping the marriage. The officials feel that it was a good move to have stopped the marriage.

Kotapalli Sandhya, 17, studying Intermediate I year.

267 cases of child marriage were brought to the attention of 16 police stations in the Vikarabad District during 2016-2017, of which 12 cases were of boys. Only 21 complaints were recorded in the police diary. No FIR was lodged and consequently the police did not frame any charge sheet against any of the accused. As a result, no case was presented before the magistrate for an injunction order.

Of the 267 cases, 248 marriages were stopped. Almost every case was settled through informal arrangements — mostly when the police met with parties to the marriage

¹² In the state of Telangana the 11th and 12th grades i.e senior secondary classes are called Intermediate Courses and are governed by the Board of Intermediate Education. These institutions are called Junior Colleges.

(parents of the bride and bridegroom) and asked them for a written undertaking that they would not pursue the marriage.

In a survey conducted to record the opinions of local police in Vikarabad District, all said that they received a great deal of support from Childline, Mandal Revenue Officers (MROs) and officials of the revenue department such as the Village Revenue Officers (VROs), Village Revenue Assistants (VRAs) and Revenue Inspectors (RIs). They were also supported by Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) staff such as the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) and the anganwadi workers. The sarpanch was effective in some cases, but class teachers, school headmasters and the Mandal Parishad Development Officer (MPDO) were not as helpful in preventing child marriages.

The police said that they could act effectively because of the following reasons — receiving early information about an impending marriage, knowing details of the marriage venue, availability of proof of age of the child either from the school register or the SC Memo. They also mentioned that the background information provided by Childline and their counseling helped them a lot..

The police stated that they mostly used Section 9, 10, and 11 of PCMA¹³ while taking action since these are penal clauses against the aiding and abetting of marriage. The police have effectively used these clauses as threats, but never registered a case against the accused. They also use provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and Section 376 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC)¹⁴. Some police personnel had suggested registering of cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016.

According to the police, referring to the sections of PCMA and other laws was enough to threaten the families to stop the marriage. While they found no gaps in the PCMA, the main factor that helped them stop child marriages was that it is illegal and a cognizable offence for a girl to be married before she turns 18 and for a boy before he turns 21. They had no use for procedures in the PCMA to stop child marriage. Thus no FIR was filed or charge sheet framed under the Act.

¹³ See Annexure 1- for details of these sections of the PCMA.

¹⁴ Section 376 deals with punishment for rape.

The police felt that the real problem were the parents and others in society who supported the marriage. They felt that each of these individuals should be held liable and awarded stringent punishments. They should be openly shamed in print and electronic media. They also suggested that parents should write a promissory note stating that they would get their sons and daughters married only after the legal age

According to them, the biggest challenge after stopping marriage was following up with the girls and boys and ensuring that they pursue education.

4. Role of school teachers and KGBV

The data on the police attitude towards school teachers and the staff of KGBV showed that there has not been much of a role for the school teachers and staff of KGBV. However, the girls' narratives showed that their support was invaluable. Often, they were the only authorities outside home whom the children had direct contact with. In many cases, they were sensitive and proactive in rescuing the girl from marriage and even took the risk of rehabilitating her. The KGBV offered temporary shelter to girls who were rescued from marriage. When it was unsafe for girls to live at home after their marriages were stopped, KGBV even enrolled them in the middle of the academic session. The girls were soon integrated with their peers without getting stigmatised. On the other hand, there is absolutely no provision in the PCMA for rehabilitating the child through any form of State intervention.

During vacations, while some girls went to their grandparents' home, others preferred to stay in M V Foundation's bridge course camp or with an NGO. The PCMA has no arrangements for safe places for such girls which they could claim as a right and not feel obliged to any person or an institution.. There is also no provision for counseling or reconciliation of these children with their families under PCMA.

KGBV staff outreach to Mamatha

'My father remarried after my mother committed suicide when I was six years old. I have one step brother and a step sister. I was studying in a government school.

When I was 13 my stepmother fixed an alliance with a 40-year-old man who had been married twice before. The first wife left him and the second died after giving birth to two children. He wanted a wife to take care of his children. I was not aware of these details. This alliance was finalised as he did not demand any dowry.

My school teacher came to know that my family wanted to marry me off when I was being taken home from school to meet the marriage party. He called Childline and told them about me. MVF also got to know about this through Childline and met my stepmother. She insisted that she would go ahead with the marriage as she could not take care of me. Childline also complained to the police station. My parents and the man whom I was to marry were summoned to the police station. My father and the man went but my stepmother did not go to the police station. The police booked a case against my stepmother under the Juvenile Justice Act for treating me with cruelty.

I came to know the details of this man, his age and previous marriages only there. I was shocked to hear his story and refused to marry him. I said I would rather remain unmarried than marry him. I was steadfast despite pressure from my parents.

On insistence of the police, I was given admission in KGBV Chevella, in Class IX. The KGBV teacher took care of my needs and I kept going to the MVF bridge course camp for my vacations.

My father ignored me and was completely influenced by his wife. One day my father visited me in KGBV to transfer the land that was in my name to my stepmother as he wanted to build their house. I mentioned this to the SI and he threatened them and settled the dispute, wherein my stepmother got two rooms in the house and I retained the land which was registered in my name.

I was sent home after my Class X examination and started to work. I failed in a subject but my stepmother forced me to work and did not allow me to take the supplementary exam. MVF staff placed a call to my parents saying they were calling from the Collector's office and it had come to their notice that I was not being allowed to take the exam. My father immediately allowed me to take the exam. I attended the special coaching classes held by KGBV for students who have failed. I had only four to five days to prepare for my examination. I passed the exam and am now studying first year intermediate. If my marriage had not been stopped what would have happened to me? All this was possible only because of MVF's intervention and the support I got from KGBV.'

Mamatha, 16, now in class XI.

5. Childline and role of local officials

Childline¹⁵ propagated its role and the helpline number 1098 for every child and defenders of child rights through posters and banners in Vikarabad District. They also contacted officials of all relevant departments urging them to protect children and their rights. It sought the support of the District Collector in forming the Childline Advisory Board at every mandal in the district. This was the first time that all the officials met regularly to review calls received on the helpline and their respective roles in helping children.

Campaign on Childline and against child marriage— girl gains courage

'When I completed Class X, they wanted to fix my marriage. I wanted to study and requested my family to stop the marriage. But I was threatened by family members. There was a campaign against child marriage in our village. I saw street plays and even attended meetings. I decided that I should study and not get married.

We were told to call 1098 if we were in any trouble. I called Childline. The MRO called MVF and they contacted me and I told them about wanting to study further. The sarpanch was informed of the marriage process. The sarpanch advised my father not to go ahead as there could be a case against him. But my father persisted with the engagement. The case went to the police. My father threatened to commit suicide in his drunken state. The sarpanch assured him that he would keep the police away and counselled him. The boy's family was upset that they were not informed about my age.

My marriage has been stopped but my father does not allow me to go to school or even out of the house. He brought another match and I called Childline again for help. My father was made to give an undertaking in writing that he would not get me married until I attained 18 years of age. But he is adamant about not sending me to school.'

Chakali Mounika, completed class X.

In the year 2016-2017, Childline received 202 calls from 97 per cent of girls and 3 per cent boys to stop their child marriages. 1 per cent of girls were below 12 years, 48 per cent were 13-15 years of age, 47 per cent were 16 -17 years old and only 1 per cent was in the 18 years category. Among the boys, 1 per cent was in the age group of 13-15 years and 1 per cent was in the 19-21 years category. Of the 202 calls received, all the

¹⁵ Information from focus group discussions with staff of Childline and local officials

marriages pertaining to boys were stopped. On the whole, 15 per cent of marriages could not be stopped and were stealthily conducted.

First, a call is made to the helpline number 1098 either by the girl herself, a local youth, school teachers, anganwadi worker and sometimes even the police, giving details of the proposed marriage or actual marriage ceremony. The anonymity of the anganwadi worker is maintained to protect her from pressures and threats of local leaders. Next, Childline contacts the local anganwadi worker and schoolteachers to conduct a preliminary inquiry, verify the facts and ascertain the age of the girl. Soon after receiving the information, Childline sends a message through Whatsapp to all the functionaries-police, MRO, CDPO, VRO, panchayat secretary and together they plan a rescue operation.

Sometimes, local officials are reluctant to stop the marriage as they see that the families are poor, have made financial commitments and informed their neighbours and others in the village. Thus, they stand in favour of tradition and convention. Yet, when part of a team in a joint operation, they give each other moral courage and perceive their role as officials on duty.

With a change in the attitude of the officials, they visit the parents and family who are informed about the laws and the consequences of violating them. There is commotion and arguments on both sides but the presence of police and local officials clinches the matter and the marriage is stopped or postponed till the girl is 18 years old. A written undertaking is taken from the parents that they will not get their child married and that they are aware that they are liable to be punished should they proceed with the marriage. In this regard, the presence of the MRO is important as he or she is the prime witness. The role of the Revenue Department represented by the MRO, VRO, Revenue Development Officer (RDO) and RI is significant.

Even when all preparations for a wedding ceremony have been made and guests have arrived, a similar procedure is followed to stop the marriage. However, arguments may take a violent turn. When the parties to the marriage do not relent, they are all taken to the police station or tahsildar (MRO). The fear of authority and law makes them succumb and they agree to stop the marriage.

Girls who called the Childline to resist marriage were mostly in the 13-15 years category followed by the 16-17 years category. 66 per cent of child marriages were stopped at the girl's home itself. Among poor families, the venue of the marriage is often the girl's home. In 16 per cent of cases, the MRO summoned all the parties to the child marriage and after a strict warning about the consequences of PCMA, the marriage was stopped. The marriage was stopped at the police station after which the girl was rehabilitated. Further, according to Childline data, maximum support to stop child marriages came from the office of the MRO, followed by the sub-inspector of police. Local officials have established their own protocols to stop child marriage. The PCMA procedure has symbolic value and is only used to point out that the marriage of minor girls and boys is a criminal offence.

Childline Calls : Agewise		
Age	% Girls	% Boys
10-12	1	0
13-15	48	1
16-17	47	0
18	1	0
19-21	0	1
Other	4	

Venue where marriage was stopped	% Girls	% Boys
Wedding Hall	6	
Girl's Home	66	1
MRO Office	16	1
Police Station	5	

Number of times officials assisted in stopping child marriages	
Revenue Development Officer (RDO)	6
Revenue Inspector(RI)	7
Village Revenue Assistants (VRAs)	2
Head Master (HM)	1
Mandal Education Officer (MEO)	7
Mandal Parishad Development Officer (MPDO)	25
Village Revenue Officer (VRO)	39
Child Development Project Officer (CDPO)	69
Sub-inspector (SI)	79
Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO)	88

Quick action of Childline stops child marriage

'My father fixed my marriage when I was 14 with a 40-year-old man with the help of his aunt. This upset my grandmother and she used to go to the temple daily, praying for God to help me somehow. While she was in the temple crying, the priest who was also a school teacher enquired about her worries and when he heard about the marriage, he called Childline. They contacted my parents who were adamant about it and said it was their responsibility and no one could interfere. The man whom I was to marry was also contacted and he was asked how he could marry a 14-year-old. Childline took the help of the sarpanch and the member of Mandal Parishad Territorial Committee (MPTC), police, government school teachers and the anganwadi worker and cancelled the marriage. But the man was still trying to send messages to my parents that he was still ready to marry me. The pressure was continuous.

I contacted Childline again and they admitted me in KGBV along with my sister. My brother goes to the local primary school. We go to our grandmother's house for holidays. Our parents have not contacted us.' *Kammari Akila, 14,*

Role of Child Welfare Committee (CWC)

When it is found that a child needs protection, she has to be rescued by appropriate authorities under the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 or even by an adult or an NGO and presented before the CWC. During 2016-2017, the CWC received several cases of child marriage in Vikarabad district¹⁶. 90 per cent of cases were referred to CWC from Childline and the rest of the cases were referred by anganwadi workers, school teachers and the local police. There were only about 10 per cent cases for preventing child marriages while most of them were about stopping child marriages. When there is information that a marriage is being proposed, talks are happening and arrangements are being made, this is a stage when the child marriage is to be prevented. On the other hand, when all preparations for the marriage are done, the date and venue is fixed and invitations are distributed, it becomes a case of stopping child marriage. When it is a case of stopping a child marriage, there is a greater sense of urgency and the CWC informs the local police immediately. In the meantime, the anganwadi worker and the CDPO conduct a basic enquiry and also ascertain the proof of date of birth of the child from the school teacher.

¹⁶Interview with Padmavati , Chairperson Child Welfare Committee, Ranga Reddy district.

All the concerned officials meet at the local police station and collect an undertaking from the parents of both the parties that they would not conduct the marriage of the girl. The CWC authorizes the anganwadi worker to monitor the case and who periodically informs the CWC about the status of the child. In case the CWC finds that the girl is at risk of getting married or subject to harassment by parents, she is referred to one of the three government homes run by the Telangana State Government in Hyderabad City. However, when they are referred to these homes, they continue to be deprived of education and are not provided counselling to cope with the changes in their life. This is a sad loss of time for the girls as they cannot go to school and miss out on classes. Girls are sent to school only at the Bal Sadan rescue home which provides education facilities and hence this government shelter is preferred. There is also fear that the girls would be stigmatised by other inmates in the home. According to the CWC, this has happened in almost every case of a minor girl who was given shelter after her marriage was stopped. Of late, the CWC has been successful in admitting such girls in the KGBVs, which they consider to be a far better option. The office of CWC and shelter homes are far from the villages, making it difficult for family members and even the Childline team to commute and follow up.

The CWC has scarce resources for performing an inquiry, travel to the site and following up on the rehabilitation of every child. Even so, it tries to coordinate with the staff of Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). They feel they could do more and even dedicate fulltime personnel if given more resources. Their authority derives from the powers given to them under the Juvenile Justice Act and this gives them strength to follow up even without resources.

However, the PCMA Act has little to offer by law for the rescue and rehabilitation of the child once her marriage is stopped.

Child Welfare Committee (CWC) shifts children to shelter home

'I have completed Class IX and have two younger sisters. Though my parents were aware that it was illegal to get me married since I was underage, they fixed my marriage with my mother's brother with a dowry of 45 grams of gold and Rs.1lakh. They performed my engagement ceremony. Before going ahead, my mother actually consulted the sarpanch, anganwadi teachers, ASHA worker and the school and they were very casual about this. There were three such cases in the village on that day. The police came to know and took all the brides, bridegrooms and parents to the police station. Later, we were presented before the Child Welfare Committee and shifted to the shelter home. My parents were very unhappy that the wedding was stopped after so much expense was incurred.' *Macherla Narmada, 15, Class IX*

6. Role of M V Foundation - Campaign for gender equality and education

M V Foundation¹⁷ is involved in programmes relating to rights of adolescent children, especially girls, in the districts of Vikarabad, Ranga Reddy, Suryapet and Mahbubnagar. It has taken up an intensive campaign for prevention of child marriage and child labour and on issues of gender equality and girls' education. It has involved local institutions such as the child protection committees in every village, women's groups, and youth activists who have begun to question violence perpetuated on girls and child marriages. Boys who were harassing girls at bus stops and in public spaces have been reprimanded. Gram Panchayats have been oriented to track children's rights. Girls' Committees have been formed in schools and have been provided orientation on gender equality, rights of children, laws and policies. Groups of girls visited the police stations to seek information on the child marriage law and how they could approach the police.

All the above programmes are based on non-negotiable principles on adolescent children.

¹⁷ M V Foundation is a voluntary organisation that is currently focusing on rights of children in the 14-18 years age group.

The Non-Negotiable Principles on Adolescent Children of M V Foundation

- 1) All girls and boys must be in a fulltime school or any fulltime education stream until completion of 18 years.
- 2) Girls and boys must enjoy equal opportunities to pursue education and build their capabilities.
- 3) Presence in an education institution should be a pre-condition for building awareness on reproductive health care, sex education and life skills for both boys and girls.
- 4) Arguments such as domestic work, distance to schools, lack of safety for girls, eve-teasing, increase in dowry, sibling care, poverty and pressure of marriage are mechanisms used to control girls' bodily integrity and deny them autonomy, and are therefore unacceptable.
- 5) Youth clubs must be non-gendered, secular spaces where all members are equal, without distinctions of gender, caste, religion, disability or any other form of discrimination.
- 6) No girl shall marry before attainment of 18 years of age. Child marriage law must be amended to nullify marriage of all girls until 18 years of age.
- 7) Even after attainment of 18 years, the girl's decision and choice in marriage is to be given full support.
- 8) The discourse on gender equality must be introduced into the school curriculum from Class I onwards.

Help from MVF and police- child escapes marriage

My father wanted to get me married when I was in Class X. The boy was from Warangal District. My mother and I did not like it and we were beaten up, refused food, scolded and pressurised. We were forced to agree to the engagement. I went to the school girls committee, presented my case and cried. The committee called the MRO and police and informed them. They stopped the marriage. When I was going for the pre-final exam, my father stopped me and my mother and we were beaten up once again.

We both left the house and went to Suryapet not knowing what to do. We contacted MVF. The local police and revenue officials decided to admit me in KGBV. My mother went home and was beaten up by the whole family. They wanted to know where I was. At midnight, people on 20 bikes came to the house of the MVF staff to threaten him. He immediately called up the SI. He asked them all to come to the police station. They went away after that. Next morning the girl's family was summoned to the police station. The MVF staff also went to the station. My family gave an undertaking that they would not get me married and took me home. The SI convinced the school headmaster to let me take the missed pre-final exams. Now I am studying in Class XI.

Aseeba Sheikh, 16, Class XI

7. Girls' committees, youth clubs and village committees for girls' rights

MVF also formed village committees of youth and school girls' committees for girls' rights. MVF conducted trainings for such groups on child rights with a focus on gender equality and child marriage. Many individuals in the village have joined youth clubs where both girls and boys participate on equal terms. Many trafficked girls working on cotton and chilli farms have been rescued from child labour and sent to schools, with support from CRPF, youth and gram panchayats. Local officials, schoolteachers and policemen have started to join these campaigns to give girls respect and support their path to education and gender equality. There is a growing awareness regarding subjugation of girls and child marriages.

Girls have been waiting just for this change in the atmosphere. Now that they know that their well-being is a matter of public debate, they have begun to assert and fight for their space as equals. Their plight is being discussed in the gram panchayats and village forums; youth are getting activated to fight on their behalf; school girls committees have been formed to give them information about their rights and encourage them to stand with each other; school teachers are facilitating meetings and are establishing a connect with the girls. It is in this atmosphere that girls have gained confidence and the courage to oppose marriage and some of them have become leaders in their own right. For the first time, they are in a struggle to realize selfhood as against the hardship and discrimination they were used to.

They are valiantly fighting against being exploited as child labour and insisting on going to schools. They have started to resist child marriage and have said no with firmness, going against parents, relatives and local opinion makers, and claimed their right to education. In fact, their determination to free themselves from the clutches of patriarchy and gender discrimination and courage to withstand pressure has given strength to their defenders to do more. It is inspiring to see the girls show stiff resistance to entrenched power structures anchoring on a ray of hope and nothing more.

Girls' Committees- empowers girls to fight against child marriage

'I was 15 years old and in Class IX when my marriage was fixed. I was on the school girls committee and village committees of boys and girls, and was aware of child marriage and the laws. I was also the leader in school and attended several workshops on gender discrimination and rights of children. I argued with my father against my marriage. He threatened to take his life. I discussed this in the girls' committees and youth clubs. But when they spoke about it with my father, he repeated his threats. The youth were afraid of repercussions. I stopped going to school.

My school teachers noticed that I was not attending school and spoke to the sarpanch, anganwadi worker and child protection committee to take up joint action in my support. They approached MVF and all of them collectively spoke to the parents. My father asked for a week's time to resolve the issue after speaking to the boy's side. I did not go to school for three months after that.

The members of gram panchayat met the boy and his family and spoke to them about the PCMA. The boy's family also backed out. After three months, I rejoined school and continued to study. I am now in Class XI and actively participate in girls' committees.

Kadamanchi Sarada, 17, Class XI

Girls anticipate threats, physical violence and blackmail of parents, grandparents and others in the family when they resist and question the arranging of their marriage. They are aware that there is little in the family milieu that would help them. They face boycott, forced isolation and deprivation of food and mobility. But they are armed with the knowledge that there are allies and know that their beliefs are both morally and legally correct. Constantly calculating and battling the odds of domination and power relations, they chart an unknown path of freedom with the hope that their future would be

better than the hell of a child's married life. In withstanding all kinds of pressures, they discover their innate strength and lift the institutions to act on their behalf.

Exercising agency –now in school

Maheswari's father passed away and she dropped out of school in Class VIII. She says, 'My mother developed relationships with two men as intimate partners. While one of them visited her at home, the other man took a room on rent and my mother met him there. I shuttled between the two spaces all the time whenever she was with one of her partners.

The man who visited the house misbehaved with me. This made me wary and uncomfortable. I could not take this anymore, rejoined school and got admitted to Class IX.

My mother and her live-in partner found it very inconvenient to have me around. My mother tried to convince me to get married saying that it was a solution to her responsibilities. Her partner also thought that I should be married. Thus they arranged my marriage to a constable who showed interest in me. I was not for the wedding but my mother was insistent and even tortured me by branding me with a hot iron spatula. She tried to stop me from going to school. She was going to kill me and drove me out of the house. I ran out not knowing where to go.

I hid in the compound of a local library until late in the night and escaped to the house of my grandfather's younger brother. But they were not willing to have me as they were afraid of my mother and also felt that giving me shelter would cause a social boycott. I asked them to let me stay with them just for that night, which they agreed. Early in the morning I went to the room of my mother's other partner. It was locked. I went to my friend's house. She had already left for work. I was helpless and sat under a lamppost crying. My friend's brother noticed me and I confided to him about the torture and compulsion. He quickly gathered the neighbours and the local youth and they confronted my mother at her work site. My mother said that if I was not willing to agree to the marriage I could not stay in her house. She also said that she was going to get a litre of kerosene and burn me alive. I heard the entire conversation over the phone speaker and was fearful for my life.

The youth and neighbours took me to the police station and also called Childline. The mahila (woman) police called my mother to the police station. She refused to come as it was night by then. I did not want to have anything to do with her and slept in the woman constable's house. She gave me courage and counselled me to be brave. Next morning, Childline staff arrived and a decision was taken to admit me in KGBV as they felt that was a safe place for me. My brother was also admitted to a social welfare hostel, away from my mother. '*Sunnam Maheswari, 15 studying in class X.*

The partnership between Childline on behalf of the Government and MVF, a civil society organization, enabled coordinated action. While Childline engaged with the system, MVF and its volunteers reached out to the community and gave confidence to the children as well as their defenders to take a stand in favour of girls and their rights. In doing so, a structured protocol is slowly being evolved and institutionalized for prevention of child marriages.

The courage of girls strengthens officials and non-officials to come together. Only when coordinated efforts take place to prevent and rescue a child from violence, can such processes be institutionalised and protocols get established. Coordinated effort does not happen in a vacuum. Further, when both the government and civil society speak in one voice, there is greater possibility of protecting children from all forms of violence and child marriage.

8. Role of PCMA

The importance of PCMA was to the extent that all the functionaries, the girls and members of youth clubs who include boys and girls and even some members of the community knew that it was illegal and a cognizable offence for a girl to be married before she turned 18 and a boy before 21 years — as a result of the Act. However, there was no knowledge of any other provision of PCMA among most functionaries.

It was only the police who were aware of relevant sections of the PCMA which they used rather effectively to threaten the families to stop the marriage. Still, they sympathised with the predicament of the impoverished family and did not take any complaint to its logical conclusion. Hence, no FIR was filed nor charge sheet framed under PCMA.

Offering resistance to child marriage requires support from the state and its institutions. The PCMA does not anticipate any hostility or threats to the child from the family. The Act has no arrangements for safe places for girls escaping marriage. There is no provision to counsel or enable reconciliation of these children with their families. There is no provision in the PCMA for rehabilitating the child through any form of state intervention. All relief has been through well meaning functionaries acting in their individual capacity.

Rescuing a child from marriage requires that all concerned departments and local institutions such as gram panchayats and civil society organisations come together. This has not been anticipated by the PCMA. Hence local officials have established their own protocols to stop child marriage.

None of the provisions in the PCMA have been found functional. The procedure of PCMA has only a symbolic value to be used to state that marriage of a minor girl or a boy less than 21 years is a criminal offence.

And the battle goes on...

Chapter 4

Laws and policies to end child marriage- how serious is the state?

The protection of girls' rights by the State and ensuring that their entitlements are guaranteed is a process of recognizing and resolving deeply contentious issues. It involves confronting power relations at the family and societal level, structural relations of production and economy and implementing laws and policies prohibiting child labour, child marriage, sexual abuse and violence. It requires ensuring that children enjoy their entitlements to education, nutrition and health. Making institutional arrangements, providing professional services and adequate investments are also necessary. In other words, it involves a commitment by the state to provide children their rightful share in national resources and transcending powerful vested interests that compete with childrens share in the resources. There cannot be halfhearted measures in this regard.

Relevant laws such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act 2015, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012 and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act 2016 have to be implemented without any compromise. However, the process of enforcement makes explicit the gaps and faulty assumptions on the basis of which these laws have been framed. Thus, there is a need to scrutinize the laws and alter assumptions to bring about changes in the laws and consequently in the lives of girls. Otherwise, the State is an accomplice to violence and denial of rights to children.

1. 'Prohibition of Child Marriage Act' 2006 (PCMA)

Under the 'Prohibition of Child Marriage Act' 2006 (PCMA), the marriage of a child or minor — up to 18 years in the case of girls and 21 years in the case of boys — is prohibited. Punitive action can be taken against all who aid and abet the child marriage, including parents, relatives and priests. It is a non-bailable and cognizable offence punishable with rigorous imprisonment for two years, or a fine which may extend to one lakh rupees, or both.

Under the PCMA, Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs) appointed in every state have a crucial role in preventing child marriages. Many a time, though

information of a prospective child marriage is available and girls have resisted such marriages, there has been no instance of the CMPO contacting the parties to the marriage, the gram panchayat or complaining to the police to prevent the marriage.¹⁸⁷⁰ per cent of children surveyed had heard of the PCMA but none had managed to access the law.

The law authorizes the CMPO to stop a child marriage by reporting the matter to the police who can arrest the offenders and also to the judicial magistrate to issue an injunction against the marriage. The child marriages described in the narratives were conducted in the presence of friends, relatives, community members and local leaders with impunity. There were no arrests and the CMPO was nowhere on the scene.

If the marriage is not stopped, it is consummated. This is when the CMPO has to extricate the girl and assist her to seek annulment of her marriage. Under such circumstances, the law empowers the CMPO to file an application to nullify the marriage. While a suit for decree of nullity cannot be filed without the assistance of the CMPO as per Section 3 of PCMA, at the same time it is not mandatory for the CMPO to do so. There has not been a single case of the CMPO filing an application for annulment. In failing to do so, the CMPO has condemned the girls to a life of immense hardship going through work without leisure, violence, abuse, pressures of dowry, repeated pregnancies, childbirth and ill-health.

While settling annulment, the district judicial magistrate is required to issue orders for the maintenance of the girl by the marital family along with visitation of children born out of such a marriage by the husband or his family.

In giving child marriage a legal status and sanctity, the law perforce makes matters increasingly difficult for the girl, whether in preventing, stopping or annulment of marriage.

The PCMA is based on the assumption that marriage has a sanctity of its own and that it is a peaceful and harmless relationship; that marriages are bound by tradition and culture that are to be respected; it also assumes that there is no difference between the specificity of a girl child and the constitutional rights guaranteed to her by law and that of an adult woman. Therefore sanctity of marriage is a norm for both children and adult

¹⁸ In Chapter 4, the roles of concerned officials are described in the context of the campaign against child marriage taken up by Childline in collaboration with M V Foundation.

woman that is to be preserved unless it becomes unbearable. It is also assumed that the girl has the capacity to exercise agency and seek annulment of marriage. Although the children born to the couple are given a legal status, the PCMA assumes that the marital family has the sole responsibility for maintenance of such children. There is also an assumption made by law that once married, she is not a child anymore and she no longer needs to enjoy her rights to education, health, protection and a life with dignity.

On the whole, the State does not consider the girl as a child once she is married. There is no State support to her in claiming any of the entitlements accrued to her by law. It takes no responsibility under the PCMA for maintenance, rehabilitation and restoration accorded to her as a child. As there is no mention of any of her entitlements by law, there is a total denial to her right to education, nutrition and health and a life with dignity. Even the children born out of marriage are not guaranteed any State protection. It expects the girl to exercise agency and seek annulment of marriage when it is a well-known fact that even adult women do not have the capacity to withstand the pressures of breaking a marriage and seeking divorce.

All through, it ignores that the girl is a child and the very logic of child marriage drives her into a black hole of violence, abuse and total subjugation.

2. Response of police

The police have powers under section 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code to make arrests in order to prevent the commission of a cognisable offence. If the parents refuse to concede at any stage of the process of child marriage, a police officer can file a complaint to a First Class Judicial Magistrate, seeking an injunction order. However the police do not proceed with the case. It is generally felt by them¹⁹ that when the option for consummation of child marriage is given by law, prevention or even stopping child marriage becomes difficult. Due to the tolerance of child marriage under law, the complaint for prevention or stopping of marriage is not even recorded in the police diary. Consequently no FIR is lodged and chargesheet framed. Issues are resolved by the police in an informal manner where parties to the marriage (parents of bride and bridegroom) are called and given a warning. They are also reluctant to stop the marriage as they see that the families are poor, have made financial commitments, informed all and thus weigh the stakes of both parties and stand in favour of tradition and convention. Further,

¹⁹Discussions with local policemen who wish to remain anonymous

the police would not want to stop child marriage as they think it is a family matter and a private issue.

At no point has there been any sensitivity about the plight of the girl and violation of her rights if child marriage is allowed. This is also a reflection of the limitations in the PCMA that has a minimal role for the State and gives importance to the family as far as children are concerned. More so, it is a reflection of the weakness of the Act that does not make child marriage *void ab initio*. A weak law results in a weak institutional framework influencing the attitudes of the functionaries and even the police in the system.

3. System to stop Child Marriage at the Local Level²⁰

The Village Child Marriage Prevention and Monitoring Committee (VCMPC) is to be constituted in every gram panchayat with the following members : sarpanch (chairperson of the committee), anganwadi worker (convenor), panchayat secretary (who is also the CMPO and member of the CMPC), Village Revenue Officer (CMPO), school principal, woman representative from a self-help group, women ward members, representative from local NGOs and the youth. There is no information about VCMPC in the villages and it is entirely dysfunctional. The individuals expected to be members are unaware about its existence.

According to procedures, the CMPO shall go to the VCMPC, get information from them and report to the magistrate on the proposed child marriage. The magistrate issues an injunction order to stop the marriage and books cases against all who aid and abet child marriage. The mandal CMPO has to act on information received from the VCMPC or any other source. Since the CMPO cannot directly give an injunction order without going to the magistrate, there is a delay. There are also no processes where the district level CMPO conducts a review of the VCMPC at the panchayat level or of the CMPOs at the mandal level. No meetings are held at any level and no records are maintained.

Further, there is no clarity of roles of officials at the local level. Hence the MRO, ICDS supervisor and others can pass the buck and not take any action.

²⁰Based on the government order number 13 regarding rules for implementation of PCMA dated 19.3.2012 issued by State of Andhra Pradesh, and also discussions with MVF activists involved in stopping child marriages.

A complaint made by an official is regarded as a complaint made in his individual capacity and not as an official bound by his duty. Unfortunately, this is how it is as it is not defined in the PCMA. This causes inconvenience especially when the person is transferred and has to appear in court in his personal capacity. This deters them from taking any action. In fact, the complainant should be the CMPO in his or her official capacity since this would enable subsequent CMPOs to follow up the case.

4. PCMA, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012) (POCSO) and IPC Section 375

What is the legal protection for girls who are victims of repeated sexual abuse and assault? The provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO) are relevant in this context. Under Section 5(n) of POCSO, it is a criminal offence if an aggravated penetrative sexual assault is committed on children (persons below 18 years). The PCMA when read with POCSO would mean that the husband, who is a relative through marriage as per Section 5(n), should be charged with the offence of penetrative aggravated sexual assault. Under Section 6 of POCSO, he is liable to rigorous punishment which ranges from a minimum ten years to the maximum of life imprisonment.

On the contrary, Section 375 of IPC which is otherwise in consonance with the POCSO, provides a marital rape exception and states that 'sexual act committed by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under the age of fifteen does not constitute rape'. It thus legitimises aggravated penetrative sexual assault, contrary to the provisions of POCSO.

Further, the PCMA lays down that a marriage contracted when one of the parties is a minor, can be declared void at the option of the party who was a minor at the time of the marriage (and until two years of the party becoming a major). In the case of females, this would mean that the girl can void the marriage till she is twenty. The option to void the marriage requires the child to be able to sustain herself without the marriage. In this context, allowing sexual intercourse during the course of the marriage would make the child accept her position in the marriage and when she bears children, moving away from such a marriage through law is a herculean task. This defeats the entire purpose of PCMA and in fact promotes the practice of child marriage²¹. This anomaly has however

²¹ M.V. Mukunda, Deccan Chronicle, 27th August 2017. The absurdity of the POCSO not applying to spouses of children is manifest through many decisions of trial courts. For instance, in West Godavari district

been rectified as discussed below. A lax attitude is also witnessed in police who refuse to file complaints under POCSO where the accused and child are married.

5. Rectification of anomaly - Supreme Court judgment²²

The incongruity in the law mentioned above has been clarified by the Supreme Court in the case of *Independent Thought v. Union of India* in October 2017.²³ The verdict reads down the exception.

The Supreme Court, while reading the marital rape exception mentioned above, reasoned that the section was in violation of Articles 15(3), 21 and 14 of the Constitution. Article 15(3) empowers the state to enact affirmative action laws for children and women. Article 21 embodies the right to life and dignity of the individual. The verdict stated that the exception was in violation of the principle of best interest of the girl child situated in the 'philosophy and ethos' of Article 15(3) and violates the right of the girl child to live with dignity and with bodily integrity under Article 21. The Court also categorically stated that special laws which are in the best interests of children and women will take precedence over the IPC.

The verdict makes three important propositions which will have a lasting impact on jurisprudence regarding children and childcare in India. The first proposition suggests that a child is a child and cannot be treated as a major or as a person who has fully realised her capabilities and faculties. The second proposition is that 'under no circumstance can a child below 18 years of age give consent, express or implied, for sexual intercourse'. By implication, there is no question of consensual sex by law as far as children below 18 years are concerned. Lastly, the Court found no rationale in creating an artificial distinction between a married girl child and an unmarried girl child — to the extent it is all right for a husband to have non-consensual sexual intercourse with his wife who is a girl child between 15 and 18 years of age — but a criminal offence to have sexual intercourse with unmarried girls. Such a distinction, the Court held is *opposed to* the best interests of the child enshrined in Article 15(3) of the Constitution.

(Sessions Case No. 54 of 2015, Decided on 25.7.2016 (West Godavari)) the court refused to convict the accused because he was married to the child. See Mukund

²² Shantha Sinha 'Criminalizing Sex with Minor Wife is a Step towards Securing Justice for India's Children'. *The Wire* <https://thewire.in/186661/supreme-court-judgment-criminalising-sex-with-minor-wife-justice-for-children/>

²³ *Independent Thought v. Union of India*, W.P. (CIVIL) NO. 382 OF 2013.

In accordance with the judgment, Exception 2 to Section 375 of the IPC is to now be read as: "Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife being under eighteen years of age, is rape".

6. PCMA and Juvenile Justice Act

It is seen that the torture and abuse faced by the child in the marital home during her marriage and in her natal home after she takes the courage to leave her marriage is enormous. She is certainly a child who needs care and protection under Section 2 (14) of the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 (JJ Act). All the children in the narratives are children in need of care and protection both before their marriage and even after the marriage.

The JJ Act includes provisions for punishing those who abuse, neglect or subject the child to mental or physical cruelty. Such punishment can include imprisonment up to three years, or a fine of one lakh rupees, or both. If the child is physically incapacitated, develops a mental illness, is rendered mentally incapable of performing tasks or has risk to life or limb, perpetrators can be punished with rigorous imprisonment of not less than three years which may extend up to ten years and are also liable to a fine of five lakh rupees.

These provisions for protection of children and the punitive clauses thereof under the JJ Act are relevant to rescue them and restore their selfhood and dignity. However, none of the girls surveyed had ever been rescued under the JJ Act.

Under the JJ Act, children in need of care and protection including those rescued from child marriage have to be produced before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC). The CWC has to conduct an inquiry and ensure care, protection, appropriate rehabilitation or restoration of rights of the child. In all the narratives of children, it was found that they were subject to psychological stress, emotional abuse, and exploitation through work, physical and sexual violence. Under the JJ Act, the CWC can also take suo motu cognizance and reach out to children in need of care and protection.

But when children rescued from child marriage are produced before the CWC²⁴, the police does not insist on registering a case. CWC refers the child to a shelter home. There is no attempt to find alternate arrangements such as foster care or sponsorship.

²⁴Based on interviews with activists working on child marriage issues.

These homes do not have education facilities which results in the waste of precious time for the girls. Only now has the CWC started referring the child to the KGBV, an apparently better institution since it provides safety as well as education to the child. But there is no KGBV policy on admitting children rescued from child marriage during the course of an academic session as yet. Admission was only possible because of some sensitive staff members and police pressure.

The CWC also has to coordinate with the police, labour department and other agencies involved in the care and protection of children with support from the District Child Protection Unit or the state government and enable access of children to appropriate legal services. Due to lack of resources, the CWC has not been able to perform all its duties. Most communication is through mobiles and Whatsapp.

Further, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) is required to effectively protect the well-being of children in difficult circumstances²⁵. However, victims of child marriage are not included in the category of vulnerable children. The CWC and Childline do use ICPS services to counsel and follow up with the child.

The JJ Act also makes a provision for 'Childline services' which is a twenty-four hour emergency outreach helpline with a dial number of 1098 for children in crisis which links them to emergency or long-term care and rehabilitation service (Section 25 of JJ Act).

7. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) (RTE Act)

Each of the girl's narratives shows that education is a major deterrent to child marriage. The narratives show that staying in school gives confidence to girls for building alliances with friends and school teachers and resisting child marriage. Most of the married children were school dropouts. There is clearly a link between education, empowerment and stopping of child marriage.

²⁵Revised Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) A Centrally Sponsored Scheme Of Government – Ministry of Women & Child Development Government of India Civil Society Partnership ICDS-
wcd.nic.in/icpsmon/pdf/icps/final_icps.pdf

Under the RTE Act, it is the state's obligation to ensure that every child in the age of 6-14 years is in school as a matter of right. Even if the child is out of school for a single day, the child's right is violated. The girls surveyed should have enjoyed their right to education at least up to Class VIII or elementary education. Yet they remained out of school, falling through the cracks. Girls narrated that they were begging or were rag-pickers - several dropped out of as a friend also dropped out, or a teacher punished her, when mothers were unwell or upon death of either of the parents. They were forced to discontinue their education after fiercely resisting the arranging of their marriage. Whenever a girl dropped out of school for whatever reasons, it went unnoticed. There are no systems in the education policy or provisions in the RTE Act to ensure that the child is tracked, retained in school or to hold the school and the state accountable.

For children studying beyond Class VIII, there is no law guaranteeing right to education. There are not enough secondary schools nearby and transport facilities are not available. On the pretext of safety and sexual harassment, girls are not allowed to commute long distances to secondary schools. They are pressured to discontinue education, partake in wage earning work and get married. There is no system of tracking such children and bringing them back to school. At times, even the KGBVs do not have a practice of tracking children who have dropped out and bringing them back. Some children studying in schools and KGBV could put up stiff resistance to marriage but some of them failed to withstand the pressure and succumbed.

Yet, some of the girls have continued in school until Class IX or X and beyond. To reach this level of education is no mean task.

8. Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 2016

Before its amendment in 2016, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 (CLPRA) covered children up to 14 years of age. The Act prohibited children from working only in those occupations and processes that were notified from time to time. All other forms of child labour were allowed to continue. Thus the work done by girls in their homes, on farms as agricultural labourers or in the informal sector was not prohibited and hence, none of the children surveyed came under the purview of CLPRA.

The Act was amended in 2016, prohibiting the engagement of children in all occupations and processes up to 14 years of age so that they enjoy their right to

education under the RTE Act enacted in 2009. However, the amended Act allowed children up to 14 years of age to help in fields, home based work and forests after school hours or during vacations but prohibited children from helping in all occupations and processes included in the CLPRA²⁶.

The reason for not prohibiting child labour before and after school hours for children up to 14 years of age is based on the faulty assumption that children need to work due to their socio-economic conditions and also to preserve traditional crafts²⁷. This compromises children's rights and weakens the law, defeating the purpose of protecting children's rights. This also affects their ability to attend schools resulting in them dropping out.

The amended Act was extended to cover adolescent children in the 14-18 years age group. Originally, it prohibited them only from working in hazardous occupations and processes such as in mines and explosives and those mentioned in the Factories Act, 1948. Subsequently it brought in an amendment ²⁸ to include 38 more occupations and processes.

However, the extent of exploitation and suffering of innumerable adolescent children documented in this study, show the gaps of the amended Act.

9. Policy on nutrition and health care

The girls in the study were overworked, exhausted and subject to violence. They had body aches, joint pains and backache with few avenues to seek advice on these ailments. In addition, the hostility, tensions and fears in their daily life led to loss of appetite and consequent weakness, ill health and low nutritional status. Girls also narrated how they had multiple pregnancies, miscarriages and abortions which placed grave risk to their own lives as well of their children. While all efforts must be made to

²⁶See, Ministry of Labour and Employment Notification New Delhi, the 31st March, 2017 http://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Amendment%20in%20the%20Schedule%20to%20the%20Child%20and%20Adolescent%20Labour%20%28Prohibition%20%26%20Regulation%29%20Act%2C%201986%20_0.pdf

²⁷<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=147876>

²⁸http://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Notification%20to%20amend%20the%20Schedule%20%28hazardous%20list%29%20to%20the%20Child%20and%20Adolescent%20Labour%20%28Prohibition%20%26amp%203B%20Regulation%29%20Act%2C%201986_0.pdf

prevent child marriages, the attitude of the government to exclude married young girls denies them access to critical health and nutrition services.

It is well-recognized that adolescence is a critical age group for the growth and health of girls, during which they require adequate nutrition and health care. Pregnancies during this period are more risky. According to the Rapid Survey on Children (RSOC, 2013²⁹) 45 per cent of girls aged 15 -18 have a low Body Mass Index (BMI) of less than 18.5 in India. The NFHS-4³⁰ (2015-16) showed that 27 per cent of women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18 and 5 per cent of girls aged 15-19 years were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey. Unmet contraception needs are about 27 per cent among married adolescents³¹. While data is not available separately for adolescent girls, according to NFHS-4, more than 50 per cent of women in reproductive age group are anaemic.

While there are some programmes for reproductive healthcare and nutrition for adolescent girls, these are highly inadequate. Despite orders of the Supreme Court in 2001 stating that all adolescent girls must be given supplementary nutrition through the ICDS, this has not materialised. In violation of the Supreme Court order, pregnant girls below 18 years are ineligible for antenatal care and nutritional facilities in the state of Telangana. Girls in the study narrated how anganwadi workers insisted on having their age changed in the Aadhar card to show that they were above 18 years to claim their right to food and nutritional security.³²

The Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) (earlier named as Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls – SABLA³³), is a centrally-sponsored scheme introduced in 2010-11 and has been implemented only in 205 districts in the country. This scheme is supposed to have a nutrition and a non-nutrition component. Under the nutrition component, girls are given supplementary nutrition containing 600 calories, 18-20 grams of protein and micronutrients, per day for 300 days in a year. The

²⁹Rapid Survey on Children, Ministry of WCD, Government of India and UNICEF, available at:

<http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/RSOC%20National%20Report%202013-14%20Final.pdf>

³⁰National Family Health Survey-4 available at: <http://rchiips.org/NFHS/pdf/NFHS4/India.pdf>

³¹Figure from “A Strategic Approach to Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCH+A) in India”, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, 2013 available at: http://nhm.gov.in/images/pdf/RMNCH+A/RMNCH+A_Strategy.pdf

³²During discussions with MVF staff it was found that this is an informal understanding presumably to protect the anganwadi worker for not intervening in stopping of child marriage and that there was no government order regarding this..

³³<http://wcd.nic.in/schemes/rajiv-gandhi-scheme-empowerment-adolescent-girls-rgseag-sabla>

non-nutrition component addresses the developmental needs of adolescent girls and includes iron and folic acid (IFA) supplementation, health check-up and referral services, nutrition and health education, life skill education, etc. In Telangana, three districts were selected i.e., Adilabad, Mahabubnagar and Hyderabad for implementation of the project during the year 2010-11. However, the budget estimate for the financial year 2015-16 was nil³⁴. The scheme does not exist in the areas where the study has been conducted.

The Kishori Shakti Yojana (KSY) is implemented across the country³⁵, but this does not include a component of supplementary nutrition. It mainly aims to work through awareness generation. On the ground, it is seen that while the supply of nutrition is irregular and does not cover all adolescent girls in the districts where it is implemented, the non-nutrition components are almost non-existent. Even where there is some involvement of adolescent girls in ensuring delivery of this service through the Kishori Balika Sanghas, there is no acknowledgement of their lack of voice in decision making in the household. The knowledge of reproductive healthcare is of little value as they have no control over what they eat, leisure, rest or sexuality. The rest of the family and community will have to be involved and sensitized for this programme to be effective. Moreover, all these programmes are addressed towards unmarried adolescents while there are a large number of young married girls with different needs³⁶.

Similarly, the recently launched maternity entitlement programme (Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana³⁷) excludes mothers who are less than 19 years of age from getting maternity benefits. The National Food Security Act (NFSA³⁸) provides for universal maternity entitlements of at least Rs.6,000 for all pregnant and lactating women. The scheme for delivering this entitlement extends cover only for the first birth and only to women who are over 19 years of age. An adolescent mother is therefore excluded from this benefit.

Since 2013, the National Health Mission has included adolescence in its strategy by aiming for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child Plus Adolescent Health

³⁴http://wcdw.tg.nic.in/scheme_sabala.html

³⁵<http://wcd.nic.in/kishori-shakti-yojana>

³⁶<http://theindianiris.com/kishori-shakti-yojana-empowerment-of-adolescent-girls/>

³⁷<http://wcd.nic.in/schemes/pradhan-mantri-matru-vandana-yojana>

³⁸http://dfpd.nic.in/LwB3AHIAaQB0AGUAcgBIAGEAZABkAGEAdABhAC8AUABvAHIAAdABhAGwALwBNAGEAZwBhAHoAaQBAGUALwBEAG8AYwB1AG0AZQBwAHQALwA=1_43_1_NFS-Act-English.pdf

(RMNCH+A³⁹). The plus A recognizes the need for inclusion of adolescence as a distinct 'life stage' in the overall strategy. Under this, in collaboration with other schemes such as ICDS and mid-day meals, the following interventions are envisaged: (a) Adolescent nutrition; iron and folic acid supplementation (b) Facility-based adolescent reproductive and sexual health services (adolescent health clinics) (c) Information and counseling on adolescent sexual reproductive health and other health issues (d) Menstrual hygiene and (e) Preventive health checkups⁴⁰. Many of these are to be implemented through the Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK⁴¹) under National Health Mission to provide healthcare and counseling services for adolescent boys and girls of 10-19 years of age. One of the recent interventions in the RKSK has been the development of a Mobile App (Saathiya Salah) for peer educators under this scheme⁴². However, this was not available in the areas of the study.

The components in Telangana State include adolescent friendly health clinics (190 Yuva clinics), weekly iron folic acid supplementation in convergence with ICDS and education departments, menstrual hygiene scheme, peer education (4 adolescents per village), and adolescent health day (once in every 3 months). All this however exists only on paper in the areas where the study was conducted.

10. Cash transfers to postpone child marriage

Several schemes have been introduced by the state and central governments to provide financial incentives to parents for delaying their daughters' marriage till they complete 18 years.⁴³ Some of them are the 'Ladli' scheme in Delhi, 'Apni Beti Apna Dhan' in Haryana, 'Kanyashri Prakalpa' in West Bengal and 'Kalyana Lakshmi' in Telangana.

The scheme is based on the understanding that parents get their daughters married early to avoid the cost of dowry and other expenses that may arise with further delay in the marriage. If the government gives cash to the family to conduct the marriage of their daughter after she completes 18 years, it could ease the burden on the parents. By making it a conditional cash transfer scheme and in linking it to the retention of girls in

³⁹<http://nhm.gov.in/nrhmc-components/rmnch-a.html#>

⁴⁰http://nhm.gov.in/images/pdf/RMNCH+A/RMNCH+A_Strategy.pdf

⁴¹http://nhm.gov.in/images/pdf/programmes/RKSK/RKSK_Implementation_Guideline_05.03.2015.pdf

⁴²<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=158578>

⁴³T. V. Sekher, *Conditional Cash Transfers and Promotion of Girl Children: The Indian Experience*, May, 2012 <http://iipsindia.org/pdf/IIPS%20Working%20Paper%207.pdf>

schools, this incentivizes the postponement of marriage and allows the girl to continue education until at least 18 years of age.

Based on this logic, the state government of Telangana introduced the 'Kalyana Lakshmi' scheme initially for SC and ST communities below poverty line and subsequently extended it to cover families of girls in BCs and minority communities. The amount of the grant is Rs.75,116 per girl and the government has allocated Rs.400 crore towards the scheme for the year 2017-18.⁴⁴

Feedback was sought on the 'Kalyana Lakshmi' scheme in a conference held on June 16 2017, from over 600 girl children studying in schools and colleges,. They were unanimous in condemning the scheme since its only message was that the goal of a girl's life is to be well settled in marriage. Girls need not pursue education beyond Class XII, the cash incentive gave relief to parents but not to the girls to continue with their education. Many a time, parents perforce changed the date of birth to show the girl as 18 and thus obtained the cash and proceeded with the marriage. Instead, the girls wished that the government supported the girls in pursuing education and provided for schools, transport facilities, free bus passes, free education, noon meals and scholarships.

11. In sum

The State has an obligation by law and its policies in rescuing the girl at every step in her life- whether in preventing her from feticide, infanticide, getting malnourished; providing her with health care, food and nutritional security; or from being pushed out of schools at the cost of her right to education; in giving support to stop child marriage; saving her from the wrath of gender discrimination, violence and sexual abuse, and so on. In not reaching out to her, the State has allowed the girl to be subject to a multiplicity of denials of entitlements. All the rights as guaranteed by the Constitution of India through its laws and policies have been flouted with impunity. It is an indictment of the State, indicative of its complicity in perpetuating injustice.

Consequently, girls are available as labour force and are often invisibilised as unpaid domestic child labour and subject to all forms of barbaric practices through child

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Roushan Ali Telangana to bless brides with 75,000 under Kalyana scheme May 17, 2017, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/telangana-to-bless-brides-with-75000-under-kalyana-scheme/articleshow/58709900.cms>

marriage. Violence is exacerbated and their exploitation is compounded. They are totally controlled and the marriage becomes a façade – it becomes an institution that gives sanctity to subjugate children. Therefore, child marriage has to be recognised as sanctified subjugation.

Once it is regarded as sanctified subjugation, the possibility of evolving a legal framework from the perspective of the girl gains strength. It would begin with a collective reading of the RTE Act, POCSO, JJ Act and the recent judgment of the Supreme Court. It would also provide for adequate institutional support that reaches out to the girls, enabling them to enjoy their entitlements to education, nutrition, health and leisure. This is all that the girls are battling for. They also want not to be controlled and not to be treated as a burden to be disposed off. If only this minimum is achieved, it could hopefully lead to their dignity and enable a transformation in their lives against all forms of violence, discrimination and patriarchal values. Only then can solutions for rendering justice to girls emerge.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study is about the need to recognise the special status of children and their rights. Lawmakers and other authorities have been oblivious to this in the context of child marriage. The study emphasises that after marriage, children are still children even when they bear children and face battles in family and society. They also remain children after separating from husbands, when living by themselves, divorced, or widowed⁴⁵. They do not qualify as adults just because they are married. On the contrary, they are controlled, exploited and subjugated because they are children.

The subjugation of the girl in the framework of child marriage gives sanction to control her in all respects- mental, physical, sexual, encompassing her body and mind. This effectively violates the right to a life with dignity and reinforces gender inequality and patriarchy. This kind of subjugation is sealed with social approval and solemnized through rituals and religion.

A plethora of reasons are cited to defend child marriage such as poverty, pressures of dowry in a delayed marriage, opinion of the neighborhood, relatives, grandparents and community, lack of safety of an unmarried girl, a burden to be disposed of, patriarchy and gender discrimination, tradition and culture. Each explanation makes it difficult, if not impossible to challenge the practice of child marriage. The lonely battles and voiceless cry of the girls get bound by the sanction to marriage and this façade of marriage remains unquestioned.

Instead, when the brutality and savagery on girls is located in the framework of sanctified subjugation, the failures of the education system, system of care and protection, nutrition and health care, and the corresponding inadequacies in the legal as well as institutional framework stand exposed. The glaring gaps in State policies and laws that overlook their plight and their resistances and its failure to respond to their anguish become explicit. In this framework, State complicity in perpetuating violence on the girl becomes evident. It disallows State commitment to render justice to children.

⁴⁵ Supreme Court judgment *op.cit.* recognizes that they are children

Liberation of girls and ending sanctified subjugation is not an easy task to be addressed through slogans, tokenism, cash transfers or postponement of marriage. A sense of urgency is required to stop subjugation and to bring about transformation in their lives. State complicity in perpetuation of violence on girls should be replaced by State obligation to provide for girls their mobility and a life full of equal opportunities. Confronting gender discrimination and assertion for equality is to be seen as a process of resolving power relations.

Respecting girls and their freedom is a political issue and an ethical compulsion which requires wholehearted commitment from the state. It is a political act bound by moral imperatives. The following minimum has to be guaranteed by the State:

1. Make child marriage totally voidable in the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA) as the PCMA only perpetuates violence on girls and deprives them of all her entitlements as children.
2. Instead amend all relevant laws and policies* from the perspective Of girls rights and render justice to them.
3. State complicity in perpetuation of all forms of violence , discrimination and patriarchal values must be replaced by the obligation of the State to guarantee girls' their rights.
4. Investments in high schools and hostels up to degree level at mandal level
5. Free text books, transportation and all other facilities until completion of graduation;
6. Setting clearly the goal of education of girls and not bind them with the goal of marriage through programs such as 'Kalyana Lakshmi'. Replace Kalyana Lakshmi with Scholarships for girls.
7. Nutritional support and midday meal program at all stages of education.
8. Regular health checkups.
9. Free sanitary pads.
10. Introduction of gender equality in the school curriculum from class one onwards
11. Accountability of all concerned departments to respond to specific complaints on child marriage – women and child, labour; education, police, revenue and welfare towards girl children.

More importantly child marriage must be made totally void under, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA). There is no question of allowing child marriage to be annulled at a much later stage after failure of child marriage being prevented and stopped. By this time the damage is done paving the way for total subjugation of the child. In addition special provisions must be incorporated in laws such as the Right to Education Act, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 and Right to Food Act, which can save children from being trapped in marriages.

Thousands of adolescent girls are waging a silent battle everyday to bring an end to their misery caused by child marriage. They too want all opportunities to live a life with dignity and get all that is due to them from the State without having to struggle and battle for their entitlements. The cost of State inaction would be too drastic resulting in millions of girls who are victims of sanctified subjugation resigned to fate.

Respecting girls and their freedom is a political issue and an ethical compulsion, requiring wholehearted commitment from the state and a moral renaissance. It is a political act bound by 'niyat' and moral imperatives.

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Annexure One***Frequently Used Provisions of PCMA by local police*****Sections 9, 10, 11, of the PCMA⁴⁶**

Provision 9 Punishment for male adult marrying a child.—Whoever, being a male adult above eighteen years of age, contracts a child marriage shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend to two years or with fine which may extend to one lakh rupees or with both;

Provision10 Punishment for solemnising a child marriage.—Whoever performs, conducts, directs or abets any child marriage shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend to two years and shall be liable to fine which may extend to one lakh rupees unless he proves that he had reasons to believe that the marriage was not a child marriage.,

Provision 11 Punishment for promoting or permitting solemnisation of child marriages.— (1) Where a child contracts a child marriage, any person having charge of the child, whether as parent or guardian or any other person or in any other capacity, lawful or unlawful, including any member of an organisation or association of persons who does any act to promote the marriage or permits it to be solemnised, or negligently fails to prevent it from being solemnised, including attending or participating in a child marriage, shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend to two years and shall also be liable to fine which may extend up to one lakh rupees: Provided that no woman shall be punishable with imprisonment. (2) For the purposes of this section, it shall be presumed, unless and until the contrary is proved, that where a minor child has contracted a marriage, the person having charge of such minor child has negligently failed to prevent the marriage from being solemnised.

⁴⁶ The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 <http://ncw.nic.in/acts/pcma2006.pdf>

Annexure Two

Narratives of girls whose marriages could not be stopped

Child marriage forces girls to face various gradations of violence which devastates them. Many go on with the hope for a better life, some choose to break away from marriage and others accept violence as a normal part of married life. Even in instances where marriages seem to be happy and there may even be no physical violence, child marriage is nevertheless a violation of childhood. It has to be reiterated that all of them are children — it is shocking and outrageous that they have lost childhood and skipped their adolescence.

1. Muttam Jyotsna, Ghousenagar, Hyderabad

'I was begging at a nearby mosque. I was about 13 years old and fell in love with a boy who was also begging near the mosque. We went for movies, ate ice cream and had fun. I would keep part of what I got from begging and give my mother the rest. Soon my mother found out about this from my younger sister, who also came with me to beg. She stopped us both from begging.

After about a year, I started to work as a helper in a garments store. I earned Rs. 3,000 per month of which I kept Rs.1,000 with myself. I made friends with a boy at the store and liked being with him. Again, my mother found out and stopped me from work. I was at home and had nothing much to do after washing vessels, cooking and other domestic chores. I would wander around the neighborhood and this is when I got interested in another boy. We met every day, day after day, and were very fond of each other. As he was also a Dalit and from the same caste and from a known family, our parents decided to get us married.'

'I was 15 years old then. After marriage, we were living with the boy's parents and his elder sister in a small village. I could not do anything without permission from my mother-in-law. At home, I thought my mother was strict since she always scolded me. But now I can see the difference. I am not allowed to eat as much food as I want or dress up well. My husband stopped taking me out for movies or to the market. He began to drink and beat me up without any reason. I was being scolded even after working hard - doing all the cooking, fetching water and firewood and other domestic work. The tension in the house was unbearable and I forced him to shift back to the city near my mother's house.

In the city I went back to working in a shop, he went for casual work. My husband continues to drink, comes home late and beats me up. He never takes me out. He does not bring friends home nor take me to meet them. After two years of marriage, I delivered a baby girl. My husband wanted a boy and was disappointed. But he took care of me during my pregnancy. My delivery was in a hospital close to mother's house. My mother is a big support to me as I leave my baby with her when I go to work'.

2. Ratna Bharati, Singareni colony, Hyderabad

'I dropped out of school to take care of my brothers' children and started to work as a garbage collector in the nearby land fill. Everyone in our locality works there. It is risky and dangerous but we have no other source of livelihood. When I was 16, my parents wanted me to get married to a 40-year-old man who was economically well off. I was in love with another boy in the locality who was a garbage collector and who was given a trolley by the municipal corporation. We met often while at work and I told him about my parents forcing me to marry an old man. He suggested that we elope. I said that we should convince our parents to get us married. We told our parents and it resulted in fights between the two families. I thought then maybe we should have eloped! It took one year and they finally agreed to our marriage. Now, my husband drinks every day, but is supportive. We go together for movies and marketing. There is friction when my husband's sister visits, since she takes away the food that we get from anganwadi centre for our children. Since both his parents have passed away, he feels responsible for his sister and younger brother. I have had three deliveries, one after another, in the previous three years. The first two were daughters and the third child is a son. I continue to work to collect garbage since we have to clear the loan from the municipal corporation for my husband's garbage trolley. I leave my children with neighbors or relatives as the anganwadi centre is far away and closes by afternoon. My health is failing me. What to do?'

3. Kalivala Swapna, Singareni Colony, Hyderabad

Swapna worked at a biscuit company in the packing section for a monthly remuneration of Rs.3,900. The factory was about half a kilometer from the house. She kept some money for herself and gave the rest to her father. She says:

'I got acquainted with a boy who was 18 years old and from my community. We started liking each other, got our families to agree and got married. I was 16 at the time of

her marriage. Before my marriage, my mother-in-law passed away and my father-in-law married again. For more than a year after marriage, I stayed with my in-laws. I had to fetch water and do the entire housework like cooking, washing clothes and dishes despite the doctor advising against strenuous work. My step mother-in-law would do nothing and was quarrelsome. She never let me eat before my husband came home and ate. I did not have food to eat as a result. Due to all this, I had two miscarriages twice within one year and fell ill.

Now, I live separately with my husband and have a son. I still have a lot of work but do not have the tension of dealing with my in-laws. But of late, my husband has taken to drinking and is also addicted to 'nasham' which is mixed with chunam and tobacco and chewed upon for intoxication. He sleeps until 11.30 a.m in the morning and goes to work late in the morning and is very casual. This is the general trend in our slum. He has no plans, does not think about future and enjoys with friends. He refuses to give money to even feed the baby. He does not send me to work. I pick fruits that dropout of the cart in the fruit market and sell them. I bring home damaged fruits, clean them up a bit and feed my son. I breastfeed the baby, but he is hungry most of the time. At the anganwadi centre, I was told that my son would get eggs and food after he is three year old.'

4. Dabbulola Bhavani, a slum in Hyderabad

'When I was about 15, I made friends with a boy who was 19. We both belonged to the same caste and he was related to me as well. He too was a casual labourer and we were paired in work as both were unmarried. We laid pipelines together and travelled together on the same tractor. I told my mother that I wanted to marry him. My parents objected and said it was too early for me to get married. We planned to elope if my parents did not agree and my parents too feared the same. Even his parents did not agree in the beginning but yielded when they saw our determination.

We got married and shifted to Hyderabad in search of work. We shared the same hut with my husband's brother, his wife and their two children. It was close to a garbage dump. The space was just not enough but we had no other option. There were daily fights between my sister-in-law and I, but we continued to stay on and work on the landfill. Two years after marriage, I had a son and thereafter tensions escalated with my sister-in-law and husband's brother. She behaved like a mother-in-law and bossed over me.

We were thrown out of the hut as a result of these tensions. Even the brothers shouted and beat each other. Overnight, we were homeless. They were so heartless and did not even care that I had a small baby. Luckily, the neighbours found an empty house that was locked and shifted us into it. They even contacted the owners and fixed the rent. We had nothing. The neighbours contributed to a stove, utensils, glasses and plates and slowly our house is being made’.

5. Ketavathi Jyothi, Chitlankunta, Hyderabad District

‘My father studied up to Class IV and mother passed Class VI. Both are agricultural labourers and own two acres of land and livestock. I studied until Class IX and then dropped out of school and tended to cattle. I fell in love with Balu studying in Class X and we wanted to get married. I told my parents and they took time to accept this, after which Balu brought his parents to meet my parents. The anganwadi worker stopped our marriage. Since we continued our relationship in secret, our parents felt we had to get married to save our reputation. We waited for a year and were married. I was 15 and he was 16 at that time.

We set up our own home and worked hard to make both ends meet. We had common friends and we also went out together. Within a year, my first baby was born and I had a caesarean. I went home for my delivery and my mother took care of me. My second one is a girl. This time I had my baby in my mother-in-law’s house. I was so weak after my delivery that I took six months to recuperate. My husband and his mother allow me to work. The nurse advised me to get sterilised and I got a hysterectomy done, even before attaining 18 years of age.

I regret getting married so early as all my friends are in Class X. But I completed Class X through open school with my husband’s encouragement. He says that I should study further but it would be difficult with two children.’

6. Mamata Chatla Village Ravipahad, Suryapet District

‘I wanted to study having reached up to class XI. I was also a good student. My aunt’s son was a truck driver and doing very well. She convinced my parents to get me married to him. The fact that he also lived in the same village was another factor due to which I could not resist. He was known to be a good person. He was hardworking and built a pucca house for his family. I also liked him. My parents sold land and with that money got me married. We lived with my mother-in-law and I was taken very good care

of. We had milk, eggs, chicken and meat occasionally. My husband would take me out when he was not driving. We also saw movies together. He gave my father money to build a pucca house. When my daughter was born three years ago, he was happy and did not hold a grudge. He played with her and took good care of her. He liked to eat a lot and drank too. He became obese and I was worried about his health, but he was casual.

He even gave me a mobile phone and would call me often while he was on the road and driving. One night when he came home, he caught me talking to someone on the phone. He became curious and asked me who it was. I said that it was a wrong number and did not know who it was. He became suspicious and took the phone number. He traced it to a boy called Srikant in the neighbourhood. From then onwards, he became very suspicious and would not talk to me properly. His mother too felt that I betrayed him and became cold to me. Everything changed in the house. He said he had forgiven me but could not reconcile to the fact that I was talking to another boy. One day when I was in my mother's house, he came to pick me up. He saw me talking continuously on the mobile phone for more than an hour. I did not notice him. He waited until I finished the call and dragged me home. He found out that I was talking to Srikant, became enraged and beat me up. He complained to the police about Srikant and his telephone calls. Even as a case was registered in the police station, he brought up the issue before the kulam panchayat. They punished Srikant and settled the matter. I got frightened and could not say anything. For six months, he and his mother tortured me. I had nowhere to go. My father too died in an accident. I lost my mother as well. I cried and felt lonely.

When my husband was getting ready one morning to go to work and washed his face, he had a heart attack and collapsed. His mother and everyone in the neighbourhood attacked and kicked me. They accused me of causing his death and said he had been such a good person and I had not given him even one day of happiness. I was five months pregnant then and wanted to have the baby. But the entire neighbourhood and my mother-in-law ganged up on me and forced me to terminate my pregnancy. I felt sad and was driven out by my mother-in-law and went to my parents' home with my daughter. There, my brother married a girl from another caste and so all our kith and kin had boycotted us. Now we have been ostracised by all. I go to work on the farm. But I am unable to join any group. Nobody talks to me. I am alone.'

All through her pregnancy, Mamatha received little health care. The anganwadi used to give her some eggs every fortnight to take home which were never consumed by

her. Now the anganwadis give eggs and milk to be eaten there. It might have helped her if she had received nourishment when she was pregnant. Due to utter poverty, she does not receive any better care at her parents' house either. The anganwadi gave her some tablets, but there is no proper treatment. She is weak and undernourished. She is also depressed and thinks only suicide will release her.

7. Veeramma, Village Muttannuru, Mahbubnagar District

'I have one younger sister while a younger brother died of dog bite. My father was an alcoholic and accumulated debts of about Rs.40,000. My mother discontinued our education and took us to work along with her. My father developed jaundice but continued to drink and he committed suicide by hanging when I was 12. I was married less than a year after his death. My mother was in a hurry to get me married as she had no confidence in me or of my safety. My husband was an orphan and was taken care of by his father's young brother. After marriage, we set up our own home. I was scared to live with him alone and asked my mother to keep me company while I got to know him better. Now, I do all the work at home and also work as casual labour. We work together at a cottonseed farm. He takes all my earnings and goes for marketing alone. But he lets me wears dresses and sometimes a sari. We also visit my mother together. We have never been to movies or any outing, only to my mother's place. I am married for three years now and have no children. My husband regrets this sometimes when neighbours comment about it. I also feel bad. I am not able to confide in my mother about not having children. This is a recent development'

Veeramma has just turned 15 and is worried about not having children. She is afraid about the relationship with her husband if she does not conceive.

8. Byagari Anitha, Village Kothapalli, Ranga Reddy District

"I regret being married. I was the only child and studying in class VII. My father was terminally ill and my family decided to marry me to a boy from the same village. I wanted to study. MVF got to know about this and filed a case. The police and officials met with both families and all agreed not to get us married and abide by the law. But three days after the actual date of wedding, they got me married in a secret ceremony, in a temple in another village. I was asked to give a statement at the police station, that the decision to marry was my personal choice and I was not forced into the marriage. My

parents also pleaded with the sarpanch and paid him by selling gold and silver. The sarpanch bribed the police and got the case closed.

My mother-in-law tortured and hit me for not getting enough dowry. The condition in the house was unbearable. I worked a lot through my pregnancy and never had enough food to eat. My husband too did not care to support me. He would come home drunk and beat me. After one year of marriage, I became pregnant and went home for my delivery. I had a caesarian and delivered a baby girl. My mother was very worried for my health and persuaded my husband to live separately from his parents. My house is close to my mother-in-law's and she continues to control me. She raises a hue and cry when my mother comes to visit me, so much so that my mother has stopped coming home. Fortunately my husband now takes good care of me.'

Anita is disappointed that she cannot take the Class X exam. She feels that if the sarpanch and others had not taken the bribe and stopped the marriage she would have had the opportunity to study.

9. Muthyam Mamata Village Singapur, Rangareddy District

'I was very sociable and had many friends in school. I would also share all that happened in college with my mother and told her about the strict maths teacher who was abusive and my disgust with teachers who teased girl students. My father did not take any responsibility for the family since he was always under the influence of alcohol. My grandfather was a big support but wanted me to get married while he was living. I stopped talking to everybody in the house and stopped eating to show how angry I was at the fixing of my marriage. I could not fight anymore and got married at the age of 17 while my husband was 26. I did not like the big age gap between me and my husband. I was also upset that I did not get the opportunity to talk to him before I got married. I was told that the boy's family had agreed to let me study and finish graduation. My husband had completed his graduation and works in a chit fund.

My mother-in-law gives me less importance as her niece is already a graduate and I have only completed Class XI. I told my husband I could not stand this comparison any longer. If I were not married, I would have also been studying in a college by now. But I conceived within a year of my marriage and completely lost hope of education. I worked through my pregnancy until the ninth month and was terribly underweight with no food or

energy. I went to my mother's house for my delivery. It was a caesarean. I weigh only 35 kg.

I came back to my husband with my daughter who is five months old. He is quite supportive, takes me shopping and buys clothes of my choice. He encourages me to pursue further studies. My younger sister's marriage was stopped by the police. I have given her full support and joined the campaign against child marriage'.

10. Sandhya, Village Aragidda; Mahbubnagar distric

'I got married when I was 17 and was the only daughter. My parents were very fond of me. I dropped out of school in Class III and started to go to work with my mother. When I was 15, my parents wanted me to get married to a suitable man and family. My husband is a casual labourer who studied up to class VII. He has no father and lives with his mother and an unmarried younger sister. My mother-in-law looked after me very well since I was the only child, she taught me to cook and do housework.

All of us work as casual labourers and I also help in domestic work. We share our wages. I have not gone to the market with my husband, but he gets me whatever I ask for. Both of us visit my mother's place in Karnataka which is six hours away. He is given respect and pampered with good food when we go home. My husband drinks occasionally but there has never been any incidence of violence. I have many friends in the neighbourhood and am on good terms with them.

Three years after marriage, I have no children, but was never under pressure. My mother-in-law kept telling me not to worry and it will happen. My mother too was not anxious and is happy that I am well settled. The neighbours too stopped taunting us when none of us reacted'.

11. Saradamma, Village, Gattu, Mahbubnagar

'My mother put pressure on me to get married since the time I attained puberty. My resistance worked for two years but my parents and relatives found an alliance when I was 16 years old. After our marriage, my in-laws, older brother of my husband and his wife and the two of us set up separate establishments. The goats were evenly distributed. We got 70 goats as our share and my husband and I would take them for grazing. I also had to do all the domestic chores. Needless to say, my workload has increased. Soon after I became pregnant, it was getting increasingly difficult to work. There was no help and I could not even complain. I did not consult a doctor. There was no proper medical

advice. I went to my mother's house for delivery. At the time of delivery, I had severe fits along with labour pains on my way to the hospital. There was no proper transport and I got into a rickety trolley that actually carries carcasses of goats to the market. The road was very bumpy and the pains had intensified by the time I reached the hospital. The doctors conducted a caesarean and the baby boy who was in coma was kept in the ICU and died after a week. My mother had to spend one lakh for my treatment and it caused us all immense sorrow.

My husband was very angry and scolded me that I went against his wishes to my mother's house. He took me back home and I was pregnant again. He didn't allow either his mother or my mother to interfere. He took good care and I had a safe and successful delivery. He is not unhappy that it is a girl and said that as long as the child is healthy, it should not matter. I now advise my neighbours not to go to their mother's place for delivery but to go only after the delivery, or they will be scolded all their lives if something goes wrong.'

12. Renuka, Village Tekumatla ,Suryapet District

Renuka says: 'I got married when I was just 12-years-old even before I had my periods. My husband was 16. At my mother's house, I never did much work as I was studying and went to school. There was certainly no wage work to be done. I would help my mother in washing utensils and sweeping the floor. After marriage I had to go to the field to work on farms. I had to learn this and my mother-in-law was impatient with me because I was so slow. I also had to cook for the entire house and as time passed, the burden increased and I was expected to do everything without rest.

I take care of the three sons of my husband's brother who live with us, cook and take care of my own baby. After about two years, I was pregnant and very anaemic and the doctor scolded me and my husband for getting pregnant so early. She said that the foetus may not survive. I was sent home and delivered a baby girl in a private hospital. It was a caesarian and I was very weak. My mother is going through depression and has no energy to support me. So is my younger sister who is mentally unstable. My father pleaded with the neighbors to help me in the hospital when I was in labor. My father took a lot of trouble for me. He was also tired. My mother-in-law was angry that I delivered a baby girl. My husband too never came to see me. Why are my in-laws not coming to see my baby? I stayed with my parents for five months with my baby and became very

anxious. Then we got a message that I could join my husband only on the condition that we paid a price for not delivering a baby boy. My father had already spent a lot for my delivery. He had drained all the money he had on my health. With difficulty and after a lot of bargaining with his son-in law, he gave away 36 *guntas* of land, which was his prized possession. But my husband demanded that he give 15 goats too. My father had to beg and borrow money and meet all the demands and finally sent me to my in-laws. My husband has stopped talking to me and I don't know if he will ever talk to me. I have no rest and am scared of my husband and in-laws. They treat me very badly, scold me constantly and punish me for having a daughter and not a son. They make me do all the work, particularly because my husband's brother's three children are all boys.

I am five months pregnant again. But how can I go to my mothers' house? My father is in grief as my mother passed away due to an electric shock. I will have to suffer. I have no proper food to eat. When I seek help from the anganwadi centre, they refuse to give me food because I am 16 years old. They say that I have to be 18 years old to get food and other facilities. They ask me to get my age changed to 18 years in the Aadhar Card. Where is the time to do that? In fact I have no time even to talk to the anganwadi workers about supplementary nutrition or any matter on maternal health care. My life is full of troubles. I have become weak and do not have food to eat. I am over worked. My only wish is that nobody should have a life like mine.'

Renuka also regrets that she delivered a baby girl and hopes to have a son at least this time.

13. Uppula Soujanya, Tekumatla, Suryapet District

'My marriage was fixed when I was 17 and in Class IX but my family waited until I finished Class X and got me married. My husband was a shepherd and dropped out of school because he was not interested in studies. At that time, his elder brother was not married and completing his B.Ed. degree. I was happy to get married and when I went to my in-laws, I readily participated in all the domestic work and also did wage work on farms. It was heavy but I did not mind because my mother-in-law took good care of me. She taught me how to do agricultural work and was quite patient with me. My husband was indifferent as he took the goats out for grazing early in the morning and returned late at night, mostly very tired. Within nine months of marriage, I became pregnant. Since I was not yet 18, the anganwadi worker and the nurse advised me to change my age in the

Aadhaar card to get food supplements. It was not easy, but since I had to access food, my brother-in-law helped me and got the Aadhaar card details changed. My whole body started swelling and I was taken to a private hospital. The doctor said I was very weak and my blood count was low. She performed cervical stitches and advised complete bed rest. I could not rest and did a lot of work as usual. I had acute stomach ache in the eighth month of pregnancy— perhaps labour pains — and rushed to the hospital. The foetus died in the womb in the eighth month and was removed after a caesarian. I should have taken rest I was told. I recuperated and continued my daily routine of housework and agriculture work as usual.

After 18 months I conceived again, and had similar problems as the previous pregnancy. This time I took bed rest and delivered a baby boy. I was in my mothers' house until the baby was five months old and my husband and in-laws took us back to their home. I went to work on cotton fields while my mother-in-law took care of my son. When the baby was given boosters, he developed fever and we consulted the doctor. But the fever increased, he was taken to a bigger hospital where the doctor said there were no chances of his survival. I lost my son.

I went to my mother's house and after two months returned to my in-laws. My mother-in-law accused me of being insensitive to the loss of two children. She heaps accusations about me to outsiders, about having no children, being weak and an evil force. They now constantly taunt me saying that I have betrayed them and their son as I can't have any more children. My husband's mother grumbles and is sarcastic saying 'why must my son go through such difficulties?' They make me feel guilty for losing my children. She makes me do a lot of work, sweeping, clearing the goat shed, cooking, fetching water and other domestic chores. I have no rest at all. I earn Rs. 400 to 600 a day during season and my mother-in-law collects my entire wage directly from the employer. They are still not happy. I can't ask them for anything. I am not offered food, no new clothes have been bought and no money given to me. I have no voice or no freedom. My husband too goes away with his goats for 4-5 days at a stretch. It is daily tension. I am not able to go to my mother's home as I have no peace of mind. My mother too is not visiting me as she feels they will send me away with her and I will be divorced'.

14. Durgam Pravalika , Village Chinna Shankarpalli, Ranga Reddy District

'I faced immense violence from my mother-in-law. She would encourage my husband to beat me up since it was two years since I was married and had not conceived. My husband did not have a conjugal relationship with me. He was having an affair with another woman. I could not share this with anyone, including my parents or my brother. I did not want to complicate matters for them. But I could not take the tension any longer. I went to my husband's brother and told him the truth. I do not know how I gathered the courage to do so, but felt that he might help me. He called my husband and seemed to have given him a piece of his mind and even about the law on domestic violence. My husband is a changed person now. He takes good care of me. He takes me to the market, accompanies me to my mother's house and I am no longer tense. I have irregular periods and he takes me to the doctor to for treatment. I am so glad that I picked up the courage and asked my brother-in-law for help.'

15. Medamani Nagamma, Village Kommaronipally, Nagarkurnool District

Nagamma was only 12 when she married Mallesh, a 22-year-old divorcee. 'I was studying in Class VI and married even before attaining puberty. I was made to cook, sweep, fetch water and clean the sheep shed which had 200 sheep. My mother-in-law would not let me sit even for a minute. After six months, I got my periods and since then my real worries began. My husband forced himself on me. He bit me, scratched me and was so aggressive each night. I was so scared. My mother-in-law would anxiously enquire if I had missed my period. I did not understand much. It seems when his first wife left him, she spread rumours that he was impotent. I was under pressure from my mother-in-law and husband's sister who together beat me up and accused me of being barren and childless. I could not complain to anyone and was totally isolated. How could I tell my mother that I was being tortured when they gave 70 grams of gold, silver and Rs 1.5 lakh as dowry? To their relief, I was pregnant within four months after my puberty. I was very weak since I had no rest and no food to eat. I went home for my delivery. The doctor scolded me and my mother for such an early pregnancy. I had a caesarean and delivered a baby girl. I went back to my in-laws with the baby. The entire family and my husband travelled to faraway places with the sheep for days together. I joined them too with my baby, tying her to a cloth cradle on the tree and managing somehow. There was no help at all. They were as abusive as ever. Within two months, I conceived again. I was frequently left behind while the family went away with the sheep because I was pregnant. I had to work, earn wages, take care of my baby and do all the domestic chores. I had no

support, no friends and became very weak. Finally, I was sent home to my mother's. The doctor scolded me again. He said that I was anaemic and may not even survive the pregnancy. I had a caesarean and delivered a baby boy. She convinced me that I had to undergo sterilisation after six months. I raised the issue with my husband. He agreed to this immediately. He has softened a bit and I am confident that I can change him to become a better person. He will not be like my father who is an alcoholic and violent, torturing my mother and all of us. My sister is in Class VII at KGBV and I will protect her with all my might to complete her education and not be forced to get married'

16. Anumaraju Rajeshwari, Village, Nandanavam, Ranga Reddy District

Rajeswari's two elder sisters are married. She and her two younger sisters have dropped out of school and work on agriculture doing hard labour on cotton and chilli farms as migrant labourers. She says, 'My marriage was fixed when I was 14 years old to my aunt's son who is a truck driver. I did not want to marry, tried hard to stop it but my parents forced it on me saying that we were poor. I have 2 younger sisters and they could ill afford delaying her marriage. I had two miscarriages and my health is poor, I have aches and pains and am always fatigued. With difficulty my husband took me to a doctor (gynae) who said there is some problem with my uterus and that I need treatment. There is so much violence from my mother-in-law and father-in-law for not bearing a child - they pull my hair, bang my head against the wall, push me and knock my head with their knuckles. I shout back and scream but it has no effect on them. They are so angry and disappointed that I do not have children'

I could not bear their abuses and was feeling mentally ill. It is then that my husband shifted them out of our house and put them in a tin shed next to ours. We have a common kitchen and their abuses continue relentlessly. I have shared my plight in the women's group but they tell me that all my problems will be resolved once I have children. I should adjust and carry on with life. I decided to join the Child Rights Protection Forum to campaign against child marriages. My in-laws do not like this either, but it has given me a lot of strength to talk about myself and motivate other girls not to succumb to pressures of early marriage.'

17. Shailaja, Village Thimmapuram, Ranga Reddy district

'I studied up to Class IX and my parents fixed my marriage with my cousin, without informing me. My mother was not for the marriage as the boy was illiterate but

was forced to agree as the boy was the son of my father's sister. He beat up my mother for this objection and silenced her. My classmates alerted the police about our engagement and I was not aware of it. The school authorities, police and officials called both families and stopped the marriage and it was postponed till I completed Class X. But we were married on the stealth. I was completely unaware of this also till the ceremony.

My older brother and his family lived separately and I and my husband also lived in a separate house. I had no help to set up my house, do the cooking, fetch water, sweep or even go for farm work to earn wages. I had never done so much work before. I also did not want to live alone with him. I felt uncomfortable when he came home in the evening and hesitated to go near him. I was scared of him as he was very aggressive and rude. Within two months, I conceived and was anxious about how I would manage my pregnancy. Due to over work, carrying heavy loads, lack of food and my husband's abuses I had a miscarriage. My mother came home to help me at home and recuperate. Within two months I was pregnant again. This time mother took over my work and I successfully gave birth to a baby girl. The family including my mother-in-law was unhappy and hurled abuses at me. I was getting weak with work and taking care of my baby girl. Six months later, I was pregnant again. My husband and his mother insisted that I get my foetus scanned to find out if it was a girl or a boy. They found that it was a girl and forced me to have an abortion. I resisted but they would not listen and got the doctor to induce an abortion. Four months, later I got pregnant again. This is my fourth pregnancy, and it has weakened me. I am very anaemic, have no food as it costs money and so much work to do. My mother-in-law is abusing me in anticipation that I would give birth to another girl. My husband too drinks and beats me up. Any reason is a reason to beat me. What a family I have got into where all are alcoholics! They brew their own liquor. Bootleggers! When I tell my mother that I am being ill-treated, she said that since my father beat her, there is nothing wrong in my husband beating me, his wife'

18. Chittamma, Village Khammampadu, Mahbubnagar District

'I studied up to Class V and was married at 17 years. My parents are casual labourers. I dropped out of school as my close friend also dropped out. Both of us went to work together until she got married. My father was very strict and we feared him a lot. We had no say in any matter. So I agreed when my marriage was fixed with my cousin.

After marriage, I joined a large family with my husband's two married brothers and their wives, his unmarried younger brother and parents. We have a small hut with two

rooms and live in this crowded space together. All the brothers have children. Each couple takes care of their own needs. There is no interference from the mother-in-law.

We have a farm and all of us work on the farm during season and also do independent wage work. There is always tension on how much we contributed as labour, how to divide the yield and earnings, among the daughters-in-law. I have some peace only when I go on wage work. I don't go out anywhere else and have no friends. I get scolded if I am seen resting for even five minutes. I never have enough food to eat. I give whatever I earn to my husband. I am entirely dependent on him for any purchases. He buys nothing for his son.

I conceived 15 months after my marriage and delivered a baby boy. I was weak, emaciated and anaemic and when I told my husband, he was indifferent. I went to the primary health centre (PHC) and they gave me some injections and said that I should eat well and rest. My husband left me at my mother's home when I was seven months pregnant and returned to him when my son was five months old. I am still very weak and tired. I do not have enough food to eat.'

Chittamma had no time for the interview. Even as the interview was going on, she cut vegetables, cooked rice, fed her baby and washed clothes — carrying her baby all the time.

19. Kommu Sandhya, Village Singareddypalem, Suryapet district.

'I have one older sister and a younger sister. I dropped out in Class V and was married at 13 years, soon after attaining puberty. The anganwadi workers unsuccessfully tried to stop my marriage. Within three months, I became pregnant and was very ill. My mother took me to the hospital where the doctor said that I had an underdeveloped foetus, heavy bleeding and advised abortion —but still refused to abort as it was too risky. My body was entirely swollen with severe bleeding and had an odour, and nobody could touch me. I was taken to a hospital in Khammam which demanded one lakh rupees for conducting the abortion. My parents sold land for my treatment. The doctor said I had survived by luck and I would need rest and good food. For six months, I stayed with mother. My mother-in-law refused to take me back as she thought I would never be able to have more children. The kulam panchayat sat together and resolved that I join my husband. I was pregnant again after a year. Due to complications, I had to frequently visit the

hospital and all the expenses were borne by my parents. The doctor advised bed rest and I gave birth to a son who is now one-and-a-half years old. After the delivery, my mother in-law was angry since her daughter could not deliver a boy, but I did. She shows her anger to the child, always scolds him and never holds him with love. When I brought this up with my husband, he asked me not to argue with her.

My elder sister has returned to my parents' home with two children because of an abusive, alcoholic husband and his mother who terrorised her. I don't want to be a burden on my parents since they are already fully supporting my sister with medical aid, daily needs, and clothes.

I have now conceived for the third time and in the sixth month of my pregnancy. Doctors keep advising me to eat and rest as I have no blood. Even now, my mother in-law continues to scold and beat me and sometimes does not give me food. My father-in-law says he is helpless and that I have to be patient. Recently she threw my things out and asked me to live separately because my husband supported me in an argument. She refused to listen when my neighbours intervened and told my mother in-law that she is wrong.

I don't know what 'sukham' is. There is no happiness or comfort. I will have to suffer. It is my karma. Life is an unending lonely battle'.

20. Sandhya, Village Aragidda , Mahbubnagar district

'I got married when I was 17 and was the only daughter. My parents were very fond of me. I dropped out of school in Class III and started to go to work with my mother. When I was 15, my parents wanted me to get married to a suitable man and family. My husband is a casual labourer who studied up to class VII. He has no father and lives with his mother and an unmarried younger sister. My mother-in-law looked after me very well since I was the only child, she taught me to cook and do housework.

All of us work as casual labourers and I also help in domestic work. We share our wages. I have not gone to the market with my husband, but he gets me whatever I ask for. Both of us visit my mother's place in Karnataka which is six hours away. He is given respect and pampered with good food when we go home. My husband drinks

occasionally but there has never been any incidence of violence. I have many friends in the neighbourhood and am on good terms with them.

Three years after marriage, I have no children, but was never under pressure. My mother-in-law kept telling me not to worry and it will happen. My mother too was not anxious and is happy that I am well settled. The neighbours too stopped taunting us when none of us reacted'.

21. Jabbu Anjali village Padara, Nagarkurnool district

'I did not want to get married at all. I wanted to study since I was doing well. I gathered courage to contact MVF volunteers and asked them to help me out of marriage. After a lot of negotiations, my parents postponed the marriage by one year. But they were under great pressure from my in-laws, and I was married stealthily to Anjaiah who was then 22 and had graduated with a BA degree. I was forced to work and take care of my sister-in-law's two children. It seems they have brought me to this house to work like a slave. The children don't care for me, or listen to me. They complain to my mother-in-law that I am not taking good care of them. Is it wrong if I ask them to eat, study and be tidy? I have my hands full, slogging from morning to night, so I do not do wage work. I have a MNREGA job card and my husband proxies for me and earns the daily wage.'

22. Kundamanchi Ramulamma, Ghousenagar, Hyderabad

'I studied only up to Class II in the local school and dropped out to go with my parents to beg. MVF volunteers motivated my parents and sent me to the bridge camp. I could study up to Class VII but continued to beg as my parents insisted that nobody in our community has ever studied this much. I was about 15 years old when I was married to a person from my caste and who was also into begging. My father-in-law was sexually abusing me. I told my husband but he would not believe me. We quarreled a lot and I was very unhappy. I told my parents that I did not want to continue with the marriage as I had to face unbearable tensions. I could not tell them more than this. I showed them the bruises I had and this worried them. I suffered like this for 18 months. My father asked the 'kulam panchayat' to settle the issue. The elders heard our case after we spent a lot of money on liquor and payment. They agreed for a divorce. I was so relieved and came back to my parent's house. After a couple of months, a common friend of the family asked my parents if I would marry a divorcee who already had two sons. They readily agreed to this match

even without consulting me as they felt that I would be well settled. I had no say in the matter and got married to a 26-year-old man and joined his family. He took good care of me but the family was very poor. I also took good care of his children, as if they were my own. I had to work hard and also beg for a living.

After one year, I became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. Soon after, my mother-in-law insisted that I have a sterilisation done. I did not want the operation and resisted. She put a lot of pressure on me and began telling my husband that I was being partial to my son and not taking care of his children. My husband too became very suspicious. No matter what I did, they were not convinced that I looked after all children as my own. I shared these tensions with my mother.

The matter about the pressure for sterilisation was brought up before the kulam panchayat. There were discussions for two full days on this. I was very frightened about escalating the issue to this level. I wondered what the verdict would be. It was decided that nobody could force sterilisation and also that my mother-in-law should take care of my husband's children in her house while we move out to set up another house. My husband is unhappy about the decision. I overwork as a daily wage worker, take to begging and also carry petromax light on my head during wedding processions while carrying my son on my hip. I try my best to keep my husband satisfied, make both ends meet, buy clothes for my stepchildren and cook food during festivals. I keep hoping that my husband does not have any complaint against me. My health is deteriorating and I feel very weak. But life has to go on.'

23. Pilli Lavanya, Village Inpur, Vikarabad District

'I resisted a marriage proposal in Class IX and protested by not eating. My eldest sister was widowed soon after marriage and was stigmatised, harassed and ill-treated. My sister and I wanted an education and not be married early. My parents relented and encouraged us to study. They would not even let us do any work at home. Only occasionally, during the holidays, we would help with cooking, washing and cleaning in the house. But when I was completing Class X, there was so much pressure from my parents, sisters and relatives that I agreed to get married — but only if I was allowed to continue to study after marriage.

Until three months after the marriage, everything was all right at my in-laws' place. Then I was asked to begin work at home from 6 am. I was given something to eat only at 11 am after the work was done. I was compelled to go to the fields and work as a labourer which I did not know how to do. When I returned home, I had to cook and was allowed to eat only after everyone else had eaten. My mother-in-law scolded me for not being efficient and my husband supported his mother. I was not allowed to continue my education, to meet anyone, visit parents or even get medical attention when I fell ill. After six-seven months of marriage, I conceived and suffered from bouts of morning sickness. I was not even aware of being pregnant. I was taken to a doctor only a long time after I became weak.

I was never taken for regular checkups throughout my pregnancy. My parents too were not allowed to take me home until the fifth month. At my mother's house, I was rested and fed, so my health improved. But when I returned to the in-laws', I was forced to continue the routine of domestic work and agricultural labour. I was also threatened to be cast away if I had a girl baby. I went to my mother for the baby's delivery with the warning that I was not even to contact my husband or his mother, if it was not a boy. I delivered a girl through caesarean. My husband and his mother didn't respond to the news of a girl being born. My husband came for a very brief visit on the third day. For five months, they refused to take me home. I was allowed to return after the husband was gifted a bike. It was such a burden on my family. They had to borrow to get me admitted in a private hospital and have a caesarean. When I went back with my husband, my in-laws and everybody was hostile. My husband took little interest in the child and showed no interest in me. He does not let me even talk to him, there is no going out, he gives me no money to buy something for the baby. The in-laws too do not show any interest in the baby. I am back to working at home and in the fields'.

Lavanya's mother has decided to educate her third daughter and let her study as long as she wants to and not get her married until she is ready. Lavanya is also determined to help her sister complete her studies.

24. Turalpati Lakshmi, Jangala Colony, Suryapet District.

Lakshmi says 'We were both 12 years old when we got married. My father has three wives, 12 children and lives with one wife for six months and they beg together. My husband Lingaiah's father also has two wives with nine children and they also beg. We

had no rituals for our marriage. We only held hands and tied a 'mangalsutra' (a thread). After marriage, I have not visited my parents even once. That is the tradition. I cook about four kilos of rice for the family and take care of all the other children who are around my age. I am now five months pregnant and feel hungry most of the time. My elders say that since many of their children were born at home, there is no need to go to the hospital. I have no Aadhaar card and so no food can be claimed from the Anganwadi centre. I was told that my entitlement to food as a pregnant woman will only be when I turn 18 years old.'

25. Rajamma, Uppala Village, Mahbubnagar District

'My mother-in-law never tolerated me taking even a minute's rest. 'This is not the first time that a woman has become pregnant. When I was young, I worked twice as hard. I never complained', she said, even before I expressed that I was too tired, especially because I was carrying. I quarreled with my husband asking if he cared at all. He scolded me and said, 'How can you not work?' Don't you know that one day of rest is a loss of Rs. 200-300 as wages?' I worked and worked till the time I was full term. On seeing me becoming weak, I was sent home to my mother's. I delivered a baby boy, but was too weak to return to my in-laws house immediately. Now, I have returned and work on cotton seed and chilli farms. I migrate for seasonal work carrying my son everywhere. My husband takes no interest in me or my son. He grabs all the wages I earn. He goes out with his friends and only infrequently takes me to my mother's place which is 50 km away.

26. Padmamma, Village PENCHIKALAPADU..

Padmamma says: 'I have two elder sisters and one brother who didn't go to school and one younger sister who has completed Class X. I studied up to class XI and my marriage was fixed when I was 16 years old. As we had no money for the dowry, my wedding was delayed by nine months to raise the money. Another condition was that all dowry demands had to be met before the marriage. The boy's family began to put pressure to give them the dowry quickly. My father took credit with heavy interest. In the meantime, I also learnt tailoring.

My husband has studied up to Class X and we spoke to each other after the engagement. He has one married older brother and they live together with their parents in a house with two rooms, which is 50 km from my parents' house. Immediately after marriage, I became pregnant. My mother-in-law wanted me to abort saying that I was

educated and did not work. They complained that I had not learnt to do household work and my husband supported his mother. I did not like the idea of abortion and could no longer accept their taunts about me being educated and being lazy. I told my father about this and he warned them against such a move and said he could take care of the baby. To prove that I could work, I worked hard till the end of my term but never received a good word, not even from my husband. He treated me well only in the first two months of marriage after which he turned violent and sided with his mother.

I went to my mother's for my delivery and had a normal delivery. The in-laws were happy that I delivered a baby boy and my husband took me home after three months. I soon got pregnant again and delivered a second boy. On the advice of the nurse, I was sterilised. After my second delivery, I strongly protested against the workload and my mother-in-law's behaviour with me. As I was weak and had two children, she asked us to set up a separate establishment.

Now we live separately. My workload has increased with taking care of two sons. I work as a coolie and my husband takes away all my earnings. He gives me nothing but at least he is all right with the children. I have a sewing machine and take some orders. This gives me some extra amount that I can spend on the children and on myself.

My health is still very bad. My husband has not shown any concern about my ill health. I consulted a local doctor, but it has not helped. Everyday my husband gets drunk and beats me up. I have aches and pains. Everybody in the neighborhood knows how badly I am being treated. His friends also try to restrain him, but there is no effect. He just will not listen to anybody.

I lost an important source of support with the recent death of my father. He gave me a lot of courage to brave my troubles. I feel vulnerable and depressed. I know that I have to fight it out and set things right, for the sake of my sons. I am determined to ensure that they study well.'

27. Sujatha, Village Tanagala, District Mahbubnagar

'I have an elder sister and a younger sister. My parents keep talking about how they have to bear the burden of three girls in the family. My elder sister was married off

very early. I had no interest in studies and was severely punishment at school one day. I discontinued with my studies and joined my mother to go for work. The issue of my marriage was brought up daily at home and I resisted it, but finally had to agree when I was 15 years old.

'I live with my in-laws, do all the work at home and also work as a casual labourer. I had a normal delivery and went to my mother's house to deliver. My son is one year old. I am back in my mother's house and full term pregnant again.

My husband is keen to let me continue with further studies. But how can I? He is a casual labourer. He drinks when out with friends and beats me when he comes home drunk — on any issue — say, when I ask him about anything he does, money or drinking or if I did not cook properly. Even if we do not go out together, we visit the temple during festivals and sometimes, my mother's house.

28. Shaheen, Village Uppala, District Mahbubnagar

'My father passed away when we were very young. My mother does welding work and got my elder sister married. I dropped out of school during Class V to help my mother. She got me married within a year when I was 13 years old, against my wishes. I wanted to be with my mother and help her. She convinced me that if I got married, she would be relieved of all her responsibilities and also that the match was a good one. My husband works as a mechanic and gives me whatever I ask for, but I hesitate to ask. In my mother-in-law's house, I do normal domestic work and help her. In the beginning, she was irritated with me as I was inefficient and did not know how to cook. I have got used to cooking and taking care of the home while my in-laws go out to work. They treat me very well and are kind because I lost my father when I was little. After two years of marriage, I gave birth to a girl. She is now 15 months old. It was a caesarian. I am pregnant now and have gone to my mothers' house for delivery. Nobody was happy that I had a baby girl. But my husband wanted a daughter. He visited me during the first pregnancy and visited me this time too. I have no friends near my husband's place but meet friends when I stay with my mother'.

29. Nasreen, Village Penchkalpadu, District Mahbubnagar

'My parents are from Karnataka. I have an older sister, a younger sister and two younger brothers. My father is a regular employee while my mother does not do wage work. She is busy running the house and taking care of all of us. I studied till Class X in a madrasa and was married. As we are three sisters and my parents had to provide dowry for us all, I agreed to get married even when I wanted to study further.

I got married into a large family. My father-in-law goes for agricultural labour and my husband is illiterate and works as a mechanic. Once my husband's brothers were all married we broke the joint family and started living separately. But there are cordial relations among us and we meet at festivals and functions. I have three children— one girl and two boys — each child was born after a year's gap. The first two deliveries were in my mother's house but the third was at my own place. My mother came to help me.

I do daily wage work occasionally and keep my earnings. I am allowed to wear dresses of my choice. We go together to visit my mother and she and my mother-in-law also visit. Our children have cousins who come home to play. I send my children to the local school. I also have access to the anganwadi centre and bring food for children. I also bring vaccines for them. My husband takes good care of me and my children. So far so good. Inshaallah, when children grow up, then let's see'.

30. Sheela Muthamma , Village Tirumalapuram, Nagarkrnoodistrict,

My marriage was fixed when I was eight years old. All the arrangements were made and there were guests in the house. I was to get married in the evening and had no idea about what it all meant. All of a sudden, MVF volunteers along with local officials, police, MRO and the sarpanch pounced on us. There were discussions that I could barely understand. I was sent to study in Hyderabad in a bridge course camp after which I was admitted in the ashram school at Jangareddypalem village. This was far away from my village, and I along with 32 others dropped out when we were in classes VII and VIII. I was 14 at that time and went back home. My parents sent me to work where I met Eedaiah, who was 18. We fell in love and decided to get married. We were given a house by an NGO working for tribal communities in the area. I have two daughters, a one-year-old and a three-year-old. I take care of them and do all the household work. My husband works as a casual labourer and also has a MNREGA job card. He takes good care of me. '

31. Dandu Padma, Village Boorugupalli, Vikarabad

'I resisted my parents' plan to get me married. I completed Class X, was 16 years old and wanted to study further. They did not listen and went ahead making arrangements, sent the dowry money and fixed the date of marriage. My brother understood that I wanted to study, argued with my parents and got the marriage cancelled. I was grateful to him and began to move around with his friends who also supported my decision not to get married. My brother and his friends were going on a picnic to a temple town and asked me to join them. I gladly agreed. At the temple, I saw that there was a well laid out space for conducting marriages. My brother called the priest and introduced me and my 13-year-old cousin as the bride and groom. I was taken aback. Even before I could protest, the priest solemnised our marriage and the bridegroom tied the 'mangalsutra.' I felt so betrayed. The boy said that he had always been in love with me and wanted to marry me. My brother tried to convince me that it was a good match as he was the only son and his mother was my aunt (father's sister) and therefore, I would be taken good care of. What could I do? My marriage was formalised in a temple. So I accepted this and we went to my parents' house as a newly married couple. They were aghast and would not let us enter the house. My mother yelled at me and asked us to get out and not show my face ever. I did not want to explain how it happened and tell on my brother. He and his friends remained silent. We simply walked out and went to his mother. She also did not let us in. She accused me of enticing and luring her only son, a young boy into marriage. She said that I should leave him and marry someone else. The boy decided to walk out of the house with me. My mother-in-law brought the matter to the kulam panchayat. They decided not to acknowledge the marriage and advised that I go back to the match I had earlier declined. But the boy was stubborn. He said he would take care of me as a husband and would not accept their decision. Only then was I allowed into my mother-in-law's house. My husband takes good care of me. We go to work together. But my mother-in-law taunts me all the time for marrying her only son who is so young. I now have a daughter and she is three years old. My mother-in-law does not carry her or do anything for her. I have not gone home or contacted my parents. Often, I feel helpless as I do not have support from my in-laws nor my parents. My husband who is 16 years old is my sole support'.

32. Pili Pavani, Village Inapur, Vikarabad District

'I got married when I was studying in Class VI. I have a sister and she is in school. The match was brought by my aunt and she said that he was an only son, well-off and would provide support to the family. I came to know that he had an affair with a married woman with two children. It was also rumored that he killed the woman's husband in collusion with her. The woman was then thrown out and she moved to a nearby village. I came to know that he continued to visit her in that village. I did not want this marriage and protested. I brought it before the 'kulam panchayat' to settle the issue once and for all. They said that all arrangements for the wedding had been made and were wary of the stigma that would be attached to me if it was called off. The kulam elders felt my younger sister would not get married if I called off the match.

At the panchayat, the man was asked to take a vow that he would have nothing to do with the other woman, drop his illicit relationship and marry me. I got married and went to my in-laws' house. I was new to work because I went to school before marriage and did only light work at home. My mother-in-law was frustrated at my being so inefficient and scolded me often. My husband was also not kind and taunted me a lot. Within a year of marriage, I delivered a baby girl in my mother's house. My husband resumed his illicit relationship on the sly. I was very unhappy and he never came to see me. It seems he was angry that I gave birth to a girl. After a lot of persuasion from my parents, his mother came home and took me back. She was even more violent after I returned. She never helped me with my daughter and would not give us enough food to eat. I had to work day in and out. My husband never held his child. When I asked him about his affair with the other woman, he would thrash me and I was asked to mind my own business. I felt sad and depressed I was carrying once again and sent home for delivery. I was very weak and in poor health. He told me that he wanted a boy the second time, but I delivered a baby girl and hence he never took me back. He told my parents he would take me and the children back, only if they presented gold to the baby.

I came to know that he has brought the other woman home. It seems my mother-in-law opposed it and asked her to leave. But my husband is adamant in maintaining the relationship. Again, I asked the 'kulam panchayat' to resolve the issue. The panchayat has not helped since my husband used the birth of two daughters as his excuse for rejection. I am so weak and have no will to live. I will not go back to him, ever.

Pavani is still with her parents. She is weak and undernourished. She hopes that her husband will break off relations with the other woman and return to her. It seems that she is on the edge of insanity and is need of help.

33. Muthyam Anitha , Addagutta, Marredpally, Hyderabad;

'I passed Class V and attended only twenty days of Class VI. I stopped going to school as I had to look after my father who was not in good health and suffered from TB. Five years later, my father passed away and the responsibility of running the family fell on me and my mother. To support the family, I worked as a domestic worker in two houses and earned Rs.2,500 a month. Later, I worked as a school caretaker in an early child care centre and earned Rs.3,000 which I gave to my mother.

She sent me to my aunt's place in Guntur to help my cousin who had delivered a baby. My cousin's husband pressured me to have physical relations. I resisted strongly and withstood his forceful attentions. He attempted to rape me on a number of occasions in the fields and at home. I told my cousin about her husband and that I would go home. She pleaded and asked me to stay back and said that she had no objection to her husband's behaviour. She felt more secure that he was not having an affair with a stranger. I resisted and left.

I told my mother and she was very worried about my prospects for marriage. A distant relative brought a match of an unmarried 32-year-old man with some property. I did not want it, but to please my mother, I agreed. He was a mentally challenged person and had no idea about a marital relationship. Everyday, my sister-in-law asked me if the marriage had been consummated and whether he had sex with me. I was irritated at such a probe. When she found out that we had not even touched each other, her husband showed him videos and pictures of copulation and started talking to him about this. My husband became curious and would pinch me and touch me in front of everyone. I was disgusted with his behaviour. When I confronted him, he would get violent. I could not tolerate his attentions, which could get painful at times. I returned to my mother's neighbourhood, but lived alone. On the intervention of community members, I moved back with my mother. She still insists that I should return to the husband as he is well off. I clearly told her that I don't care for having a husband or his property. Just leave me alone! She does not bother me any longer. I am preparing for my Class X exams through open schooling.'

34. **Mardannapalle Pallavi, Village, Naryanpur, Vikarabad District**

I did not want to get married. I was in Class VII and wanted to study more. My parents threatened me and said that I could leave the house if I did not listen to them. I pleaded with them. I told them that I would stop school and work to earn wages and help them. They did not pay heed. I was just about 13 when I was married to a 22-year-old man. In the first year, my husband was all right. He would often take me to my mothers' house. I felt comfortable and did not complain or mind when my mother-in-law forced me to work and scolded me for not working properly. After a year of marriage, I delivered a baby boy. It was a normal delivery and my mother took me to my in-laws. I stopped frequenting my mother's house because it was difficult with my child. I started doing all the work in the house, going to the fields to work, returning home and working again. There was no rest. I asked him to buy me some trinkets and he got very angry with me, thinking that I was nagging him. He became suspicious and accused me of infidelity. He did not like me talking to the neighbours or laughing. He started to abuse me physically. His mother too joined in beating me up and silencing me. When I questioned him, he threatened to remarry and send me to my mothers' house.

Amidst this tension, I conceived again and now have three sons. All through my pregnancies, there was no healthcare. The anganwadi workers used to give some eggs every fortnight to take home, but which I could never consume. I became weak and had health issues but my husband would not take me to the doctor. My condition is worsening. The anganwadi worker is giving me some tablets for my problem but there is no proper treatment. When I ask for help, my husband does not respond or quarrels with me. After each quarrel, I am sent away to my mother and return after some reconciliation. His violence has become so unbearable that I told my mother about his behaviour. She said that this was our lot and we should move on and scolded me for not adjusting. He does not give me any money or get anything for children. He has an illicit relationship with another woman and if I question him about it, he beats me up and the children. I am now in my mother's house with my sons. My parents are very poor but I will not go back'.

Pallavi is weak, undernourished and depressed. She thinks only suicide will release her.

35. Roja, Village Aipoor, Suryapet District;

'I was determined to study and do well. My parents sent me to the residential school at Nakrekal. When I was in Class IX and 14 years old, I was asked to come home for my engagement ceremony. I refused to go home and said quite strongly that I would like to study along with my friends and pleaded with them not to get me married. I thought they had relented, but when I visited home for vacations, I was told that they had already given a dowry of Rs.1 lakh and said that it was impossible to break their commitment to get me married. The pressure from the boy's side was growing and they asked for a decision of the kulam panchayat. I was allowed to complete Class X and postpone the marriage by one year. They argued that the boy was 28 years old and is self-made, has no parents. I was told that he is nice and had worked to get three of his elder sisters married; singlehandedly performed all household chores, wage work and took care of his younger sister who is a heart patient. He is in dire need of help and needed someone to look after him, cook and take care of his house. I insisted on completing at least Class X which they allowed. Soon after that I was married to him.

My husband is an auto driver. He works one day and rests for four days following that. Drinking has affected his health. Since my husband is irregular at work and unwell, I had to work overtime to earn wages, run the house and look after his younger sister who has a heart problem and is just three months younger than me. I also have to serve my sister-in-law who ran away from her husband and is staying with us with her two children. She was kidnapped by her own husband who was a sadist and demanded a ransom. He also forced her into prostitution. He was caught and beaten up. Another sister-in-law also came back with her two children since her husband was a drunkard and torturing her. She has gone back after her husband was counselled. I had the responsibility of looking after all of them,

I was new to agricultural work but was compelled to learn to pluck cotton, do cross-pollination and sow paddy. Within two months of marriage, I got pregnant and had a miscarriage in the fourth month of pregnancy. I felt very weak. When I consulted the doctor she said that my blood level is very low and asked me to have a good diet and bed rest. She scolded me for becoming pregnant at such a young age and said I should take care of my health. But where is the time to rest? I had to do all the work, else the family would starve. In a matter of two years, I had four miscarriages. There was no medical help in any of the pregnancies. Each miscarriage took place in the first trimester and I was at home each time, without anyone's help or knowledge. I had severe bleeding after each

miscarriage. I went to my mother's home for rest. But I had to return because my husband's family was so dependent on my earnings.

I was over-worked, in ill health and totally devastated. There was nobody to take care of me in my husband's house. I returned to my parents' house and do not want to go back. My parents feel I should go back at the earliest as my husband is a good person and does not ill-treat me. They say he is my aunt's son and we should not let him down and that my husband is sad as I am not going back to him. They sometimes tell me that he is my only future as nobody will marry me especially after four miscarriages. They keep pressuring me to go everyday, using all kinds of arguments. I don't want to go. I question them 'I am your only daughter, have I become a burden to you?' I have had enough of frequent miscarriages and the heavy workload. There is not even enough food to eat. I am tired and not willing to go back.

Roja looks thin, sick and very weak. She cried and said 'I am frightened, scared and shivering. I want to die. It is just a waste to live.' She has no food and goes around the neighbourhood begging for rice, oil and some food. Neighbours felt sorry for her in the beginning and tried to give her some supplies but now they avoid her. She is going through immense anxiety and depression. She curses her parents for not listening to her and getting her married at such a young age. The community is working on her husband to abandon her and remarry since she miscarried four times. She feels that no other girl should face problems as she did.

36. Eedamma, Village Dandalamtanda, Nagarkurnool District

I got married when I was 13 years old to Venkatesh from the Lambada tribe. Venkatesh never went to school and worked as a bonded labourer in his village. His mother is an ayah (care giver) at the anganwadi centre. My sister-in law has completed Class X and stays at home with us. I have been treated badly since the day I got married. I can't tell you how my mother-in-law and sister-in-law pulled my hair and beat me even after I yelled, screamed and cried. It had no effect on them. They became more violent if I raised my voice. I am a Chenchu and they are Lambadis and the entire neighbourhood comprises of Lambadis, I felt lonely. I did not know their language. Nobody came near me or spoke to me. My in-laws, even my father-in-law, told everyone that I was evil and showed how I could not even cook properly. They poured water in the dal I made and when my husband came home, it angered him so much that he would beat me. He would

always come home fully drunk and spoke foul language. He was never nice to me. He was under his mother's influence.

They never gave me food to eat. I starved most of the time and had to work without any help. My mother-in law took away whatever wages I earned. I had no money and never bought anything for myself. My husband never asked me if I needed anything. I had no courage to talk to him. I lived like this for a year-and-a-half. I wanted to die. My parents were so poor that I did not want to complain to them. So I did not even see them. 'I could not bear the torture any more. I thought to myself that I don't want that husband anymore or that work and that family. I decided to go home which was at least 100 km away. I slipped out of the house early in the morning on pretext of going to work, walked 8 km to the nearest bus stand, afraid that I would be caught. I was relieved that nobody saw me. I took a bus to Mannawaripalli and begged for money to buy a ticket. I collected Rs.25 from some people and got down at Brahmanapalli. I walked 3 km in the Mannanur forest. I was not afraid or anxious. I had nothing in my mind at that time and reached Mannanur town. I met a known auto driver from my village and said to him that I had no money and requested him to drop me off along the way. He looked at me with sympathy and dropped me at Ippaipalli. It was late in the evening by then. I had nothing to eat. But never mind. I am going home, I felt. There I took another auto, a friend of my father's, who enquired about me. I did not tell him much. He dropped me off 5 km from my village Bapannapadu. I had to walk 5 km in the night, waiting to reach home and see my mother and father. When I reached home in the night, my mother was shocked to see me and the condition I was in. She is very understanding and has not asked me to go back.

In the meantime, her in-laws came along and called for a lambadi panchayat to take her back. Eedamma took courage and spoke about how badly she was treated and all her ordeals. She said that she lost her health became weak and was broken completely- physically and mentally. The Lambadi community panchayat decided it was her fault and that she should join her husband. But she has refused to go back and is staying with her parents now for 8 months. She goes for work with her mother on cotton farms, mirchi farms and has found her peace. But she looks emaciated, has her hair disheveled, looks sick and as if in a trance while she narrated her story.

37. Papuram Prasanna, Village, Parveda- Rangareddy district

'I had a happy childhood. I had friends, played games, sang songs and was active in school. I would take on boys who harassed me and my friends on the way to school. They feared me. When I came home, I helped my mother, fetched water, cooked and washed clothes but my mother did not want me to waste time and preferred that I studied, watched TV and had the freedom to do what I wanted. All my friends stopped studying after class X because there was no transportation. I too discontinued, but planned to somehow pursue my education.

I often told my mother that I did not want to get married but she kept saying that she has two daughters and it was a heavy responsibility. There was a general fear that it was not safe for girls to remain unmarried and that we would fall in love and elope. My parents spoke about girls in the village who had inter-caste marriages and eloped. Thus my marriage was fixed to a boy who was 26, the only son of his parents and had property. I was only 17 and did not want to marry, but thought about my parents, their poverty and responsibility of settling my sister and educating my brother. So I agreed without much fuss. My parents took heavy loans to pay for dowry, gave cash and gold to the boy's family and got me married.

But when I reached my marital home, I felt unwanted and like a stranger. Nobody spoke to me. I was not given instructions regarding where to put my things and my husband and his mother objected to whatever I did. My mother-in-law would just not help. She was violent and demanded that I get soaps, toothpaste and other things from my mother's house. I was never given special food to eat. On the other hand, my mother-in-law and husband would often visit my sister-in-law's house, leaving me behind and ate well there. My sister-in-law too always fought with me when she visited us. My husband gave his salary to his mother and never asked me if I wanted anything. Even when I visit my mother's house, he demands cash from my parents for travel expenses.

They did not let me talk to the neighbours and would get suspicious. Soon, they started to beat me up on trivial issues and I began crumbling. My husband would not listen to my complaints and shut me up brutally. He would ask me to talk to him only when his mother is not around.

At night, my mother-in-law would strangely sleep with her head near our bedroom door. Around midnight, she would cough and my husband would go out the room, bolt it from outside and come back only after two or three hours. He seemed to be having an affair with a married woman with two children and who was a tenant in the house. When I asked my husband, he never replied. I used to confide in my mother but she could only listen sympathetically and did not help in the matter. I stopped sharing my woes with my mother since she was helpless

For the first two years there was no consummation of marriage. My mother-in-law would accuse me of not having children and used that as an excuse to beat me up. I picked up courage one day, confronted and told her that she very well knew that there had been no sexual contact between me and my husband and how did she expect me to have children? She said that I could leave the house if I was so unhappy. Her son would find another girl. I was so enraged that I asked the kulam panchayat to meet and settle the matter of my divorce. Then I made a public statement in front of the community about the marriage not being consummated and also about the violence from in-laws. The kulam panchayat agreed for a divorce and agreed to my parents demand to return the dowry amount of Rs.3 lakh as compensation for divorce me. At this demand, my in-laws took me back home and two months later, I was pregnant.

My entire duration of pregnancy was a torture. I had cravings for food but was not given anything. There was total hostility in the atmosphere. I don't know how I survived until I went to my mother's home for my delivery.

At the time of delivery my husband refused to be with me. It was a breech baby and my husband finally came to the hospital when he was threatened with action if he did not sign the form. He came on the condition that the baby should not be dark like me and a girl. I delivered a baby girl and stayed in my mother's house for recuperation. My husband and his family did not visit me for three months. My parents sought the help of the 'kulam panchayat', which met again and threatened my husband and mother-in-law to take me and the child back.

. Nothing has changed in my relationship with the in-laws and husband. If anything, it has worsened. My baby is so undernourished. When my parents celebrated the baby's first birthday, my mother-in-law refused to bless me or the child. She pushed me against the wall and I was so hurt that I sought refuge at my mother's place.

The kulam panchayat met again. They recommended that I go back and that I and my husband live separately from his mother. They threatened to withdraw support if I did not take their advice. I have no strength to tolerate this cycle of violence, come home to parents, have a panchayat, go back to the husband and face domestic violence again and again. My parents hope that the situation will improve. I am isolated completely, doing all the work in the house with and have no with anybody in my mother's house.'

Prasanna has lost weight; she was tonsured at Tirupati and is totally unrecognisable. She has not received support from the anganwadi centre or women's self-help group. She prays that nobody should face problems as she did. She strongly believes that girls should be married only after the permitted age and through their own choice. She feels that the practice of child marriage should be put to an end.

38. Tallapalli Shailaja , Village Nutankal , SuryapetDist,

I am the only daughter. My father left my mother and I grew up with a loving grandmother and my mother. I had reached Class XII and an aunt fixed my marriage. We were told that the boy has land and runs a taxi business. When I got married, I found that he was only a car driver and they had lied. Since I did not know how to cook well or perform domestic chores efficiently, my mother-in-law was impatient with me. Each day our relationship became sourer and she started to complain to my husband. I could not defend myself and he became wild with me. He would come home drunk and lost all sense of decency. One night, my mother-in-law went to somebody's house while I fell asleep. She knocked the door but since I was asleep, I could not hear her. Next morning she had a fight with me and complained to her son that I had deliberately locked her out. My husband beat me up. This time I shouted back and asked what his mother was doing outside her house, so late in the night. He did not take this kindly and forced me to go to my mother's house. He announced that I had conceived, but also lost his temper and beat up my mother and grandparents. My family lodged a complaint against him at the police station.

He in turn called for a kulam panchayat since we had complained against him at the police station. The panchayat decided that my mother would sell land and pay a penalty of Rs.2 lakh to my husband. After a ten-day trial, my mother agreed to give land which was in my name but did not approve its sale. My husband did not agree and left me

behind with my mother. I delivered a girl baby and my mother had a cradle ceremony to celebrate. My husband came and everyone beat me up in front of everyone. I do not want to go and live with him. My mother is convinced that she will never send me to live with him. The neighbours speak adversely about me since they feel that I left my husband.

39. Nimmala Alimelu, Village Mannanur Mahbubnagar district

'I dropped out of school in Class VII due to difficulties in school. I was studying in the ashram shala⁴⁷ and never visited my mother during the vacations and instead went to her elder sister's house. This is because my mother was living with another man. My elder sister was already married and I was next. My aunt found a 32-year-old man who was already married twice. He visited me when I was with my aunt and I did not resist. Both our families drank together in my aunt's house and that is how we were married in the presence of family. We stayed on at her place for a while and he had no relations with me for that duration. He took me back home to his sister and then the troubles started. I was scared and refused to sleep with him. He was frustrated and started to beat me up and so did his sister. At that time, MVF was conducting a child marriage campaign and they came to know about my situation. The police took my husband, his sister and my mother to the police station. I refused to accept that I was even married as there was no thaali and mettelu⁴⁸. I also showed the evidence of beatings, scratches and hair being pulled. The police counseled them and declared that I was not married. I was then admitted in a shelter home and began attending KGBV. I have no contact with my husband and his family. Earlier my mother used to scold me since my marriage was dissolved, but is happy to see me doing well. She is also educating my younger sister. I do not go home since my aunt could claim me or my mother might make me work in the fields. I have completed Class X and am now in Class XII.

40. Ponnala Navya, Village Maddiralal.

'My father was an alcoholic and passed away leaving behind my mother and five daughters. Both my elder sisters were married and I was next. I was only 14 years old and studying in Class IX and resisted getting married. My mother beat me up and said that she would throw me out of the house if I did not want to get married. I had to agree

⁴⁷ Ashram shalas are residential schools, especially for children of the tribal community run by the state government with funding from the Centre.

⁴⁸ Thaali is the sacred thread that is tied by the bridegroom around the bride's neck. Metteli are toe rings. Both are indications that a girl is married.

and my aunt proposed that I marry my cousin who is the eldest of three brothers in their family.

After I got married I was sent to the in-law's house. I and my husband were locked in a room and he forced himself on me. I ran to the door and sat scared in the corner of the room and cried all night. I was so afraid that I did not want to be alone with him. My mother's house was in the same village and I would run there every other night. This went on for six months. Neighbours scolded me, pressuring me to get into the rhythm of married life. My in-laws were worried that I would never bear children. The pressure was so much that I attempted suicide. My friend rescued me but my mother was not willing to help me in any manner.

My in-laws asked the kulam panchayat to resolve the issue. They decided that my mother should pay Rs.10,000 as fine to get a divorce. Mother does not spare me for making it so difficult for her and keeps pushing me to work all the time. My sisters too scold me and ill-treat me, saying that I deserve no support or food. They call me names for bringing disrepute to the family and ask me to do all the work and earn wages to repay the debt incurred by mother to get me a divorce. My mother does not feed me and takes away all my earnings. There is no affection or sympathy from anyone in my family or among relatives and in the neighborhood. I am all alone. I attempted another suicide by trying to set myself afire. Neighbors smelling the kerosene rescued me. I have irregular periods. I went to the nurse for help and she said that I was very anemic and needed treatment. But where is the money to buy medicines? The doctor called my mother and counseled her but she is still uncaring about my health and issues. I am totally depressed. I don't want to live anymore. I am going out of my mind and feel so lonely.'

41. Saroja, Village Chintalakunta

'My parents are uneducated, own land and are also daily wage workers. I have one older brother and four sisters, all uneducated. My marriage was fixed when I was 16 years old. I was not aware of the implications of marriage. After marriage, I lived with the in-laws and my husband's younger brother. I was not used to doing any work around the house. My mother taught me cooking just before my marriage. Now I work along with my mother-in-law. For four years, there were no children and outside taunting caused more problems than my in-laws. We went to many temples along with my husband. I am now six months pregnant and very nervous about the pregnancy. My mother's house is 14 km

away and we visit her together for festivals. My husband does as his mother says. My workload has come down after my husband's brother got married.

42. Turaka Lakshmi, Village Madhavaram Suryapet District

'My parents are agricultural labourers. My older brother and sister studied up to Class V. I was married at the age of 15. My husband is not educated, he is the only child and has no father. My mother-in-law has no property or assets. She takes good care of me. I conceived in the first month of marriage and my husband also takes good care of me. I am anaemic, had a caesarean and am pregnant again. I worked until the eighth month of my pregnancy and have been advised rest. But how is this possible?

42. Nenavath Alivela, Village Padmanapalli, District Mahbubnagar

'I have no father and my mother works as casual labour and also brews 'gudumba' (country liquor). I studied till Class X in KGBV at Peddakothapally and my brother was sent to a private school till Class V. I was engaged to marry when I was 14 years old to Ravi who was 16 and an orphan. He was considered an eligible bachelor with assets. I wanted to study further and did not want to marry. In the meantime, my marriage was delayed for a year as my father died. Soon after, I was forced to marry him. I was determined to study and continued to go to school even after I got married. I dropped out of school after completion of class XI when I delivered a boy. I wanted to pursue my education and so rejoined school. But I dropped out again in Class XII as my daughter was born. I was determined to complete Class XII and did so against all odds. I had to manage home, my children, take care of oxen, cows and work on land on my own. I was also scolded when I did not work well. I carry both children to work. My husband did not help me at all.

43. Dabbulolla Lakshmi Mud Fort, Hyderabad

I have one older brother, a sister and a younger brother. I studied up to Class VIII but had to discontinue after puberty. My mother died when I was six. I took care of my brother's children, did all the domestic work and went to school.

I was married at 15 years to Anil Kumar who was 21 and from Guntakal. He has three brothers and a younger sister. The two elder brothers are married and all of them

living in a joint family with my in-laws. The siblings quarrel and there is always tension in the family.

After a year of marriage, I delivered a baby boy and after a year, I gave birth to a daughter in a hospital near my mother's house. I have not been in good health since the first delivery. Due to tensions in the house with the other siblings, we migrated from Bellary near Kurnool to Hyderabad city. We took a garbage trolley on loan from the municipal corporation. My husband is taking good care of us now that we are away from the joint family.

44. Sarvar Lavanya Hamali Basti, Musheerabad Hyderabad

'I was in Class VII when my parents forced me to get married. I vehemently refused. Much against my wishes, my parents discontinued my studies when I was in Class VIII and I was forced to marry when I was 16. I wanted to stay back and help my mother who worked hard and faced abuse all the time. I had started working at a college in Karnataka and was earning Rs.4,000.

I was forced to marry a 21-year-old relative from the same place. He worked in a gym as a helper. We migrated from Karnataka to Hyderabad and live with my in-laws who were allotted a house under the Rajiv Swagruha Scheme. My mother-in-law is a municipal sweeper and father-in-law is a sewage cleaner. I have a daughter and son. My husband takes good care of me and takes me to movies with children. During vacations, my sister-in-law who studies in Class X, my husband and I play cards and carrom and we are friendly'.

45. Megavath Rajeshwari, Village Ramamchedulapalli, Mahbubnagar

'I have two older sisters and a younger brother. My parents never went to school. I studied till Class VIII in a government school and stayed in a social welfare hostel. Since my mother was not well, my marriage was fixed when I was 13 and my husband was 25. I resisted, but to no avail. My family brought him to my house and my sisters insisted that I marry him.

My husband's father passed away and his mother abandoned him and remarried. He drives a JCB vehicle in Ranga Reddy district and both of us moved there.

My husband worked from 6 am to 10 pm and was never home. I was soon pregnant. I was also alone all day. I wanted to have a boy as I felt a girl would suffer. I was afraid his mother would harm the baby, so I stayed with my parents for a month after my delivery and returned when I felt safe and confident. I manage my baby and the house entirely on my own. However late, I wait for my husband to come home and have dinner. I even had to learn how to dress properly since I was too young and unaware.

Annexure Three

Narratives of girls whose marriages have been stopped

These are narratives of girls whose marriages were stopped. Many of them fought valiantly against their own families. They sought justice with help of friends, community, school teachers, local officials and police. They are pursuing education against all odds. Some girls' marriages have been stopped through the initiative of local NGOs and the officials. A few were unprepared for such an action and were unhappy about the stopping of their marriages. They too have been rehabilitated and are continuing their education.

1. Mamatha, Srinivasnagar Colony, Pargi

'My father remarried after my mother committed suicide when I was six years old. I have one stepbrother and step sister. I was studying in a government school.

When I was 13, my stepmother fixed an alliance with a 40-year-old man who had been married twice before. The first wife left him and the second died after giving birth to two children. He wanted a wife to take care of his children. I was not aware of these details. This alliance was finalised as he did not demand any dowry.

My school teacher came to know that my family wanted to marry me off when I was being taken home from school to meet the marriage party. He called Childline and told them about me. MVF also got to know about this through Childline and met my stepmother. She insisted that she would go ahead with the marriage as she could not take care of me. Childline also complained to the police station. My parents and the man whom I was to marry were summoned to the police station. My father and the man went but my stepmother did not go to the police station. The police booked a case against my stepmother under the Juvenile Justice Act for treating me with cruelty.

I came to know the details of this man, his age and previous marriages only there. I was shocked to hear his story and refused to marry him. I said I would rather remain unmarried than marry him. I was steadfast despite pressure from my parents.

On insistence of the police, I was given admission in KGBV Chevella, in Class IX. The KGBV teacher took care of my needs and I kept going to the MVF bridge course camp for my vacations

My father ignored me and was completely influenced by his wife. One day my father visited me in KGBV to transfer the land that was in my name to my stepmother as he wanted to build their house. I mentioned this to the SI and he threatened them and settled the dispute, wherein my stepmother got two rooms in the house and I retained the land which was registered in my name.

I was sent home after my Class X examination and started to work. I failed in a subject but my stepmother forced me to work and did not allow me to take the supplementary exam. MVF staff placed a call to my parents saying they were calling from the Collector's office and it had come to their notice that I was not being allowed to take the exam. My father immediately allowed me to take the exam. I attended the special coaching classes held by KGBV for students who have failed. I had only four to five days to prepare for my examination. I passed the exam and am now studying first year intermediate. If my marriage had not been stopped what would have happened to me? All this was possible only because of MVF's intervention.

The entire support for this case came from Childline and the police. The anganwadi worker and the CDPO said that they had no idea about this case.

2. ***Kotapalli Sandhya, Village Meghavanampally, Ranga Reddy district***

When I was in Class X, my marriage was fixed to a 25-year-old relative. I was 15 at the time. The anganwadi worker called Childline one day before the marriage. Childline contacted M V Foundation (MVF) and also the police. The next morning MVF volunteers and the police came home. By then, my family knew that my marriage was going to be stopped and decided not to make any public preparations. There were no signs of a wedding being held. My house was whitewashed and inside there were preparations for the 'devunilagnam' puja – but as if it was not for my wedding. We went to the nearby temple to perform the marriage. In the meantime, the police came to the temple and — all of us — the families, bridegroom, me and everyone else attending the wedding were rounded up and taken to the police station. The police tried to negotiate, persuade and threaten. They told us about the child marriage law and that the marriage was illegal. I was tutored by my parents to say that I was willing and wanted the marriage. My family

would just not relent and said that they had made all arrangements for the marriage. The bridegroom's parents announced that my marriage was already over and they would take me to their house.

The police felt we were being adamant and took us to the Collector's office. The Collector ordered that I be admitted into the KGBV and counseled my family, saying that she would immediately transfer Rs.10,000 to me and support my education. She did not allow my mother take me home. I completed Class X in KGBV and was allowed to take the exam in the village, escorted by constables with strict instructions from the Collector that my family would not be allowed to meet me. I am now studying Class XI in Sadashivpet Junior College.

The family rued that they had accumulated debt worth Rs.4 lakh, purchased gold and had become a laughing stock. The Collector has said that all children who are 5-18 years of age have to study. If there is a child marriage, the teacher and anganwadi worker will be suspended. There were no complaints about MVF stopping the marriage. The officials feel that it was a good move to have stopped the marriage

3. ***Basireddypalli Nandini, Village Godumaguda, Vikarabad District***

'When I was 15 and in Class IX, my aunt brought an alliance for me as I was supposed to be pretty and the boy was not asking for too much dowry. My friends got to know about this and reported the matter to the school head master. He asked me about it and I confirmed it, saying I did not want to get married. He called my parents to school and cautioned them that a case could be lodged against them since I was underage. But my parents continued with preparations for the marriage. I told my friends and they informed the headmaster. He called Childline who contacted all the local officials. They came to my house and spoke to my parents - but they were still not willing to stop the marriage.

Childline got me enrolled in Class IX at KGBV Dharur to prevent me from being married. I completed Class X and again my mother started to pressure me. She scolded and threatened me, alleging that I had brought disrepute to the family and pushed them into debt. I sought the help of Childline to continue my education as they had helped in stopping my marriage. They helped me get a seat in Vikarabad and I am now studying in Class XI staying in the SC hostel.

4. ***Jambula Prasanna, Village Pargi Vikarabad District***

'I was in Class X and studying in KGVB. When I went home for vacation, I was surprised that my parents were making arrangements for my marriage. My father drinks a lot and fights with the family about getting his three daughters married. I was so badly beaten by him, that I agreed. When I went back to KGBV, my friends found me tense and crying. My hostel warden enquired and I told her that my marriage was fixed, but I wanted to study and did not want to get married. The teachers informed the headmistress and called Childline. She also advised Childline to not to take up the matter in school as it would disturb studies.

Childline and the local officials went home and it seems my parents denied that there was a proposal to get me married. The school principal cautioned my parents against coming to school and taking me home. My mother also said that my father would get drunk and beat and abuse her. My parents were taken to the police station and gave an undertaking that they would not get me married until I completed 18 years of age.

One night my father came home drunk and beat up my mother badly. Unable to bear the violence she committed suicide,. I was so sad and went home to meet my sisters, but returned to school to complete the exam. I passed well with a very good grade. I am now studying Class XI and staying in a hostel. My mother would have been so happy if she knew that I am doing well in studies. My two younger sisters who were going to the local school are now taking care of the house and cooking. All of them want to continue studying, but out of concern for my father, do not want to join KGBV. They said 'what will happen to us if our father also falls ill and dies?'

5. ***Sunnam Maheswari, Village Chevella Ranga Reddy District***

'My father was mentally unbalanced and absconding. After three months, he was found dead in 2012. I have a younger brother and he goes to school. I dropped out of school in Class XII to help my mother. My mother developed a relationship with a man who stayed in our house occasionally and also an illicit relationship with another man whom she visits in another room taken on rent. Thus neither of two men know about each other. I was shifted between the two locations whenever her partners visited. My mother found having me around very inconvenient. The man who visited the house also tried to

misbehave with me. This made me wary and uncomfortable. I could not take this anymore and rejoined school and got admitted in Class IX.

My mother tried to convince me to get married saying that it was a solution to her responsibilities. Her partner also thought that I should be married. Thus, they arranged my marriage to a constable who showed interest in me. I was not for the wedding but my mother was insistent and even tortured me by branding me with a hot iron spatula. She tried to stop me from going to school. She was going to kill me and drove me out of the house. I ran out not knowing where to go.

I hid in the compound of a local library until late in the night and escaped to the house of my grandfather's younger brother. But they were not willing to have me as they were afraid of my mother and also felt that giving me shelter would cause a social boycott. I asked them to let me stay with them just for that night, which they agreed. Early in the morning I went to the room of my mother's other partner. It was locked. I went to my friend's house. She had already left for work. I was helpless and sat under a lamppost crying. My friend's brother noticed me and I confided to him about the torture and compulsion. He quickly gathered the neighbours and the local youth and they confronted my mother at her work site. My mother said that if I was not willing to agree to the marriage I could not stay in her house. She also said that she was going to get a litre of kerosene and burn me alive. I heard the entire conversation over the phone speaker and was fearful for my life.

The youth and neighbours took me to the police station and also called Childline. The mahila (woman) police called my mother to the police station. She refused to come as it was night by then. I did not want to have anything to do with her and slept in the woman constable's house. She gave me courage and counselled me to be brave. Next morning, Childline staff arrived and a decision was taken to admit me in KGBV as they felt that was a safe place for me. My brother was also admitted to a social welfare hostel, away from my mother.

The mother also started to spread the news that I was taken away forcibly and hidden from her. She contacted all the local leaders and cried for help and spread lies about how I put her to shame by taking her to the police station. But I was not afraid anymore.

I was admitted in the KGBV hostel in Class VIII after I gave a statement that I wanted to study in KGBV of my free will. My mother came to the hostel to visit me and started to beat me. Thereafter she was not allowed to enter the KGBV. My mother no longer visits me.

The police also took the decision that the land that belonged to my father would be held and transferred to us children. My mother was denied rights to sell the land.

During vacations I go to the MVF Chandrayangutta Camp. Many a time MVF staff counseled me to get in touch with my mother. I am not ready for this as yet, since I would like to look after my younger brother. I am apprehensive about my future after Class X since there are not many hostel facilities for the intermediate level.'

6. ***Kammari Akila, Village Devunierravalli, Ranga Reddy District***

'I have a younger brother and sister and am now studying in KGBV Chevella hostel. My mother died after an illness of two years. I stopped going to school in Class VIII and was asked to take care of my siblings. My father remarried within a year. My stepmother started to torture us and refused us food. All of us wanted to go back to school and asked our father, but he was not willing. He wanted us to stay and work at home and also earn money for our marriages. My paternal grandmother took us to her house and looked after us. She maintains us on her meager pension. My brother and sister were going to school but I was at home to help my grandmother.

My father fixed a marriage when I was 14 with a 40-year-old man with the help of his aunt. This upset my grandmother and she used to go to the temple daily, praying for God to help me somehow. While she was in the temple crying, the priest who was also a school teacher enquired about her worries and when he heard about the marriage, he called Childline. They contacted my parents who were adamant about and said it was their responsibility and no one could interfere. The man whom I was to marry was also contacted and he was asked how he could marry a 14-year-old. Childline took the help of the sarpanch and the member of Mandal Parishad Territorial Committee (MPTC), police, government school teachers and the anganwadi worker and cancelled the marriage. But the man was still trying to send messages to my parents that he was still ready to marry me. The pressure was continuous.

I contacted Childline again and they admitted me in KGBV along with my sister. My brother goes to the local primary school. We go to our grandmother's house for holidays. Our parents have not contacted us. My friend Maheswari who also joined KGBV after her marriage was stopped is from the same village and we are good friends. I stand first and she second in class.

7. *Kadamanchi Sarada, Village Maharajpet, Ranga Reddy District*

'I was 15 years old and in Class IX when my marriage was fixed. I was on the school girls committees and village committees of boys and girls and aware of child marriage and the issues and law. I was also the leader in school and attended several workshops on gender discrimination and rights of children. I argued with my father against my marriage. He threatened to take his life. I discussed this in the committees. But when they spoke about it with her father he repeated his threats. The youth were afraid of repercussions. I stopped going to school.

My school teachers noticed that I was not attending school and spoke to the sarpanch, anganwadi worker and child protection committee to take up joint action in my support. They approached MVF and all of them collectively spoke to the parents. My father asked for a week's time to resolve the issue after speaking to the boy's side. I did not go to school for three months after. The members of the gram panchayat met the boy and his family and spoke to them about the Child Marriage Act. The boy's family also backed out. After three months, I rejoined school and continued to study. I am now in Class XI and actively participate in girls' committees

8. *Kothagudem Madhavi, Village Chandippa, Ranga Reddy District*

When I was in Class X, my marriage was fixed to Srinivas from Sadasivpet. My father is a drunkard and came home with bruises and wounds. My grandparents took care of us. My sister's marriage was conducted by them and they wanted to settle my marriage too, while they were able. Seeing my sister's struggle, I refused to marry. But during one of his bouts of drinking, my father had a fall and was injured and so the pressure grew to get married while he was still alive.

I was also on the village committees. I brought up the issue of my marriage in a committee but I received no support because of the plight of my father and grandparents. I was feeling hopeless.

Three cases of child marriage were fixed on the same day since it was auspicious. The Child Protection Committee and some others questioned the gram panchayat about their inability to stop child marriages in the village. They accused the sarpanch of allowing child marriages despite orders to stop them. The sarpanch had a meeting with all of them and it was decided to prevent these marriages. The schoolteacher spoke to the bridegrooms and convinced them to wait until the girls attained 18 years of age. I was also counseled to talk to the boy about my desire to finish Class XII and not marry until I attain legal age. He said it would mean long bondage if he had to wait for me to turn 18. But he also calls me to give me support to study well and do well in my exams. I am now studying in Class XII.

9. *Chakali Mounika, Village Poddatur, Ranga Reddy district*

My mother died of cancer when I was in Class VII. My father did not remarry and became an alcoholic. I have an elder sister who is married and a younger brother. My aunts and other family members support us. When I completed Class X, they wanted to fix my marriage. I wanted to study and requested help to stop this. But I was threatened by my family members. There was a campaign against child marriage in our village. I saw street plays and even attended meetings. I decided that I should study and not get married.

We were told to call 1098 if we were in any trouble. I called Childline. The MRO called MVF and they contacted me and I spoke about wanting to study further. The sarpanch was informed of the marriage process. He advised my father not to go ahead as there could be a case against him. But my father persisted with the engagement. The case went to the police. My father threatened to commit suicide in his drunken state. The sarpanch assured him that he would keep the police away and counseled him. The boy's family were upset that they were not informed about my age. My marriage has now been stopped. But my father now does not allow me to go to school or even out of the house. He brought another match and I called Childline again for help. My father was made to give an undertaking in writing that he would not get me married until I attained 18 years of age. But he is adamant about not sending me to school'.

10. ***Desavath Saritha , Ippalapalli, Mahbubnagar***

'I have a younger sister and an older brother. My brother is in Class XII, while my sister dropped out in Class VIII. I studied in private school up to Class VI. My mother died of fever and my father was an alcoholic. He too collapsed and died after carrying sacks of grain and our family was paid a compensation of Rs.1 lakh. The relatives too pooled in and found a match for me. I used to work on chilly and cotton farms then. I opposed it and appealed to the gram panchayat. There was a big meeting with local officials and the sarpanch who asked my relatives to stop the marriage and warned them of the consequences. They asked MVF to enroll me in their residential bridge course camp. I studied hard and prepared for the Class X open school exams and passed. My grandmother wanted me to take training in tailoring as a skill. Instead, I learnt computers and got a diploma in computer applications and stayed in the MVF camp. My aunt paid my fees. I buy clothes for myself during holidays. My sister was joined KGBV. The boy I was supposed to marry is waiting for me and there is no pressure from them. He is an agricultural labourer.'

11. ***Mamatha, Village Vankeswar, District Mahbubnagar***

'I was studying in Class IX when I was 16 and my parents wanted me to get married to my mother's brother Srisailam to avoid dowry. We were engaged in December 2014. MVF intervened to stop the marriage although I was keen to marry him since he had a good job and was in the army. The inspector of police stopped the marriage and spoke to him about the child marriage law and the risk to his job if he violated the law. I was disappointed as I thought I would have a better life with him as my husband. My father would drink and beat my mother and abuse me. I felt marrying would have been a great relief. My relatives and neighbours were very angry and accused MVF staff of spoiling my life and chances.

I am now studying in Class XII in Sri Chaitanya. Earlier, Srisailam used to visit me once in two months. But then he stopped coming and started abusing me if I called him. He is married to another girl whom he liked. The girl studied in an MVF camp and is a graduate.

12. ***Macherla Narmada, Village Kamsanpalli, District Mahbubnagar***

I have completed Class IX and have two younger sisters. Though my parents were aware that it was illegal to get me married since I was underage, they fixed my marriage with my mother's brother with a dowry of 45 grams of gold and Rs.1 lakh. They did my engagement ceremony. Before going ahead, my mother actually consulted the sarpanch, anganwadi teachers, ASHA worker and the school and they were very casual about this. There were three such cases in the village on that day. The police came to know and took all the brides, bridegrooms and parents to the police station. Later, we were presented before the Child Welfare Committee and shifted to the shelter home. My parents were very unhappy that the wedding was stopped after so much expense was incurred.'

I am also upset that my marriage was stopped and now I am above 18 years, stigmatised and nowhere to go'.

13. ***Elukachenu Nandini, Village Vankeswr, District Mahbubnagar***

I am now in Class XII with a younger sister in Class VIII and a brother in Class V. My parents are tenant farmers. My marriage was fixed with my mother's brother when I was in hostel and studying in Class IX. They had given him a dowry of Rs.1 lakh in advance. I was unaware of this arrangement. There was an engagement ceremony and MVF came to know about it and stopped the marriage. We were told that it was illegal as I was underage. The next morning, I was admitted into a social welfare hostel and enrolled in a government school to pursue further studies. He agreed to wait for me till I attained 18 years of age.

After six months, I came to know that he fell in love with a girl in his neighborhood and married her. I am quite relieved that he is married but also angry that he did not live up to his commitment of waiting for me. My parents are happy that I am doing well in my studies and are hopeful that I will be an engineering graduate and get a good job.

14. ***Jedagoni Anusha, Village Tirmalapur, District Mahbubnagar***

'I was studying in Class VII and was only 12 when my marriage was fixed with my aunt's son (my cousin). He has completed his graduation and owns three acres of land. The relatives got together and fixed the marriage. There was a grand engagement. My father gave a dowry of seventy grams of gold and Rs.1.5 lakh in cash as an advance to

settle the marriage. My father was very close to their family and managed their land holdings, agriculture and crops and was their right hand man.

I was not willing to get married and contacted MVF to inform them. MVF brought the anganwadi workers and MRO to intervene and stopped the marriage. My cousin who was supposed to get married to me was angry and had my father beaten up for stopping the marriage. Later, he got married to someone else and refused to return the dowry.

My parents were very upset and stopped my education. I am depressed that so much expenditure was incurred and wanted to die. I was tortured and abused by everyone in the family for bringing such ill fate. Thankfully, my mother's brother came to my rescue. He saw what I was going through, counselled my parents and admitted me in KGBV. I have now completed Class X and will study further'.

15. ***Gunde Mounika, Village Tekumatla, District Nalgonda***

"Both my parents are disabled. My father became lame in an accident and my mother's spine has been affected. She can only walk with her back bent double and is almost bedridden. I also lost use of my hand because of an electric shock and my legs have also been affected. My marriage was arranged with a boy from Nalgonda when I was studying Class IX. His brother-in-law had taken a loan from my parents and became very friendly with me. He proposed a marriage with his relative. The boy was a graduate and they wanted a dowry of Rs.20 lakh. They were given Rs.50,000 at the time of engagement. My father also registered a plot in my name. The neighbours were not very happy as they felt I was too young and I also wanted to continue studying. But my parents insisted on the marriage. I went on a hunger strike to protest against this decision. I also asked my friends to convince my parents. They stopped the marriage arrangements. I am now pursuing a two year diploma course."

16. ***Dharavath Vennela ,Village, Pandyanayak Thanda, District Nalgonda***

"My father has two wives and five children. My mother is the first wife. My older sister is married and they want to get me married. Father stays with his second wife. I was in Class IX and 14 years old when my parent started to look for a match for me. They fixed my marriage with a boy from Kodad village and who is also studying. They wanted

Rs.5 lakh in dowry. I did not want to get married. I protested by not talking to anyone in the family and by not eating. I informed the anganwadi centre and MVF. My parents were upset and beat me. The relatives went to the boy's house to convince them to postpone the marriage. They were upset and refused to return the Rs.5,000 that was given in advance. The mediators tried to explain that I am a minor and there would be a case against them if they went forward. The marriage was stopped."

Though the girl is studying in Class XI, there is a lot of pressure on her to agree. She is also campaigning against child marriage in her neighbourhood.

17. *Vaija Anitha, Village Arvapalli, Suryapet District*

I am studying in Class XII. My father died when I was seven years old due to illness. The family accumulated debt for his treatment and sold our land to pay the debts. My elder sister and mother worked as agricultural labourers. My second sister and I would go to school. After school, we did all the work in the house. My eldest sister was married at 14 years. We went in to debt again. My second sister had to stop school and go to work. After two years, our relatives got a match for the second sister and got her married against her wishes. MVF, other authorities and the police came to stop her wedding. The landlord spoke to the police and the wedding was performed secretly at night. She went to her in-laws. Her husband was a drunkard. The mother-in-law and husband harassed her and demanded more dowry and sent her home. My sister refused to go back to the marital house. Now, after two years, the panchayat is negotiating a divorce. The family has not returned Rs.20,000 which they had agreed to return. After the divorce, she was married again into a poor family. Seeing her struggle in poverty, my older sister and brother-in-law are helping her out. When I was in Class X, when my marriage was also fixed. I saw the boy and after they went away, I expressed my refusal. My mother and my eldest sister scolded me but my second sister supported me, quoting her own example. But my mother was insistent. I got in touch with MVF and the CRPF and they convinced my mother to stop marriage efforts. I am now studying in Class XII. I work as agricultural labour during the holidays to pay my fees. My mother continues to put pressure but I want to complete my education.

18. *Sumalatha Paraboyina, Village, Mothe, Suryapet, District*

I was in Class VIII when my parents started to prepare for my marriage with my maternal uncle who was to get a dowry of Rs.15lakh. This was decided when I was born. The MVF volunteer got in touch with my parents and grandparents and stopped the marriage, explaining its illegality. I was scolded but the marriage was postponed. My maternal grandfather is a ward member. He was the convenor of the Child Marriage Protection Committee and given the responsibility of stopping marriages. Therefore, he had to stop this marriage. But he was diagnosed with cancer and wanted to see his son married. But the marriage was stopped. He died of cancer 6 months ago. I am now studying in Class XII.

19. ***Aalakunta Mamatha, Village Suryapet, Suryapet District***

We are four sisters and I am the eldest. My parents are quarry workers. We have no house and we live in a tent. My father did not send us to schools since we were girls. I was taking care of my siblings. MVF tried to convince my parents for our schooling, but they did not agree. Then the teachers, CRPF and the women's group collectively urged and convinced them to send all of us to the government school. But we often drop out of school and MVF follows up with us.

When I completed Class V, my father refused to send me to school. MVF staff admitted me along with eight other girls in KGBV on the same day. When I was in Class VII, my marriage was arranged with my maternal cousin. My parents took permission from school saying that relatives were visiting. After I reached home, I was told about my marriage. I informed MVF and local officials who spoke to my father and stopped it. Every month when I come home, there is pressure on me to agree. I now quickly go back to school even before the vacations end.

20. ***Aseeba Sheikh, Villlage Atmakur, Suryapet, District***

My father wanted to get me married when I was in Class X. The boy was from Warangal District. My mother and I did not like it and we were beaten up, refused food, scolded and pressurised. We were forced to agree to the engagement. I went to the school girls committee, presented my case and cried. The committee called the MRO and police and informed them. They stopped the marriage. When I was going for the pre-final exam, my father stopped me and my mother and we were beaten up once again. We both left the house and went to Suryapet not knowing what to do. We contacted MVF. The local police and revenue officials decided to admit me in KGBV. My mother went home

and was beaten up by the whole family. They wanted to know where I was. At midnight, people on 20 bikes came to the house of the MVF staff to threaten him. He immediately called up the SI. He asked them all to come to the police station. They went away after that. Next morning the girl's family was summoned to the police station. The MVF staff also went to the station. My family gave an undertaking that they would not get me married and took me home. The SI convinced the school headmaster to let me take the missed pre-final exams. Now I am studying in Class XI.

21. ***Jillapalli Mounika, Village Munagala Suryapet District***

When I was in Class XI, my marriage was fixed and an advance of Rs.10,000 was paid to the groom's family. The gender committee came to know and after counseling from the police, local officials, panchayat and MVF, my parents gave an undertaking that they would not get me married. My mother died after six months because of an electric shock and two months later, my father also died. I have a younger brother and sister and we can survive only if I go out to work. I am now studying in my second year of college and supporting my siblings.

22. ***Gadudala Renuka, Village Maddirala, Suryapet***

"We are two sisters and one brother. When I was in Class X, my marriage was fixed with a dowry of seven lakhs. We gave an advance of Rs.3,60,000 at the engagement with the rest to be paid at the time of the wedding. MVF came to know and informed the local officials and police. They all came to meet the family three days before the marriage. Meanwhile, the family had distributed the invitations and made all the wedding arrangements. Both parties were taken to the police station and an undertaking was given that I would not be married until I am 18. The boy was trying to get a government job. He was told that if he married a minor, he would not get the job, so the marriage was stopped. The parents were upset as they had already spent a lot of money for the dowry and arrangements. I am now studying in Class XI."

23. ***Uma Guggulothu, Village Nuthankal, Suryapet District***

When I was in Class VIII, my parents wanted to get me married. My older sister is married with two children. My second sister refused to get married as she was studying in Class XII and threatened to commit suicide. The relatives and parents left her alone, but

wanted to fix the match for me instead, since it was a good one. I told my school headmaster that I did not want to get married. He got in touch with MVF for help. MVF contacted police and the local officials and they met the family. They took an undertaking from my parents that they will not get me married till the legal age. I am now in Class X.

24. ***Gundala Triveni, Villlage, Penpahad, Suryapet, District***

We are two sisters and my older sister is married. When I was in Class IX, the family fixed my marriage. My school teacher informed the anganwadi staff. Immediately, the police and other authorities were also informed. They came to meet the family. The family pleaded that they have only daughters, the dowry would increase and we would not get such a match again. The officials informed them about the law and admitted me in KGBV and now I am in Class X now.

25. ***K. Maheshwari, Village Gadwala, Mahbubnagar District***

I have an older brother and a younger brother and sister. The older brother has not been to school. I am in Class VIII, my sister in Class VII, and the other brother is in Class IV. When the sarpanch came to know that my marriage was fixed, he informed MVF and the wedding was stopped. I now walk one and a half kms to the Zila Parishad High School (ZPHS) in the next village. I have no courage to ask anyone for help.

26. ***B. Nagaveni, Village Kakulvaram, Mahbubnagar District***

We own six acres of agricultural land. I have two older brothers. The eldest brother studied up to Class X, married with a son and works in a garments store. He sends some money to support the family. The second brother studied until Class II and is an agriculture labourer. When I was in Class IX, my parents wanted to get me married. They fixed it with a boy who had studied up to Class X and is an agricultural labourer. I did not want to marry but could not tell anyone. MVF came to know about my marriage and stopped it. After the marriage was fixed, I could not go to school for three months. After the marriage was stopped, I am going to the ZPHS Sindhanur school. I am now studying in Class X. I will not marry until I am 18 years old.

27. ***Shabana, Village, Kakulavaram, Mahbubnagar District***

My father owns four-and-a-half acres of agriculture land. My family work on their land and also work as labour outside. My three brothers are married and have children.

The eldest did not go to school and is an ice cream seller, the second brother studied until Class V and has an ice cream factory, while the third brother studied till Class X and is an autorickshaw driver. They all live separately after my mother asked them to contribute to family expenses. Except for the third brother, who was given one acre of land, the other two have been told to wait until I get married.

My marriage was fixed when I was 17 to a man who has completed his B.Ed. degree. The school girls committee came to know about the engagement. The teachers and MVF staff counseled my parents and stopped the marriage. My parents went to the groom's family and explained the consequences of child marriage. The groom's parents also agreed to wait as they had seen a child marriage being stopped and the economic loss to the family. They have agreed to wait until I am 18 years. I have completed Class X. I am now attending tailoring classes.